A WOMAN·OF·FORTY

ESMÉ STUART

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A WOMAN OF FORTY

A MONOGRAPH

BY

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A WOMAN OF FORTY.

CHAPTER I.

LADY MARY MILTON had a passion,—she wished to make her parties as *recherché* and as famous as were the salons of the *ancien régime*. She had taken as much pains to attain this object as other women do to attain literary or scholastic fame. She believed that she would have as much pleasure when success crowned her efforts and her invitation cards were looked upon as real treasures, as a Girton girl does when she can put M.D. or D.S. after her name, or when she is hailed as senior wrangler or first classic. Let us, however, pass over all the period of effort, for at this moment Lady Mary Milton had reached the desired pinnacle. She was at the height of her triumph; she did not even regret all she had gone through to reach her coveted position. It is superfluous to say she was a very clever, original woman. She was not, however, as clever as many of the women who were invited to her house, nor as original as several original London ladies we could name; but she had the exact proportion of originality, clever-

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ness, good and bad temper, power and weakness, necessary to win her cause—and she had won it.

Her husband, Frank Milton, Esq., R.A., was a fashionable portrait painter. He was not a great artist, and a thousand years hence he would not be an *old master;* his pictures would be forgotten as well as his sitters, or only brought out of dark corners as bad examples of a bad period. Nevertheless, he and his generation were firm friends. He painted portraits that were always pleasing; he put neither too great originality in his faces or his technique, but he held the balance equally between the modern impressionist, the modern un-impressionist, and the pre-Raphaelite. He easily imbibed ideas, and he knew human nature by instinct, so he suited his picture to his sitter—and what more was required of him? The public had taken a fancy to him; the public did not know why, neither did he, but it was a fact. The other artists laughed at him behind his back, they scorned his popularity, and he knew it. Charles Seymour—the great impressionist, who painted people as if seen through a London fog, and landscapes as if it were always evening, and sunshine disgraceful—could not mention Frank Milton's name without a muttered anathema. Lighthill, who was favoured by provincial lord mayors and gave equivalent paint for their guineas, said that Milton's manner was execrable, that his paint would not stand the test of time, that he knew nothing of the first principles of art, and that

the rage for him was a disgrace to society; but the fact remained unquestioned—Milton was popular. In spite of everybody, society people *would* be painted by Milton. They insisted upon it; they showered their guineas on him; they were immortalised in order of application; they demeaned themselves to beg that their special pictures might be one of his exhibited portraits; they pressed their gifts upon him, which gifts were delicately hidden bribes; and, above all, they praised his wife and allowed her to be a queen of society.

Frank Milton himself was a thoroughly good, hard-working fellow. There was no humbug about him and no pretence, but he could not help knowing that he was popular and that he was rich. He was sorry the artistic brotherhood thought so little of his pictures, but he forgave them, for in his inmost soul he was not *very* appreciative of his own work, still his style was liked by fashionable ladies, and he was not going to quarrel with them for that, not even for the sake of all the other artists in England. The truth was, he thought more of a word of praise from Lady Mary's lips than of all the fine sentences of the dukes and duchesses in the world. If Mary said his picture was pretty, he knew she meant it; usually she told him his portraits were made to order, and on these occasions he contented himself with smiling or asking her what would be the cost of the new show she was preparing for her next triumph.

The two were a devoted couple—devoted in the best sense of this much-abused word. They were so sure of each other's affection that, had some one come and told Milton his wife had eloped with the Duke of Blackwater, he would have taken the announcement quietly and answered that she would soon come back. Lady Mary had so many men friends that Frank did not know them all, but what did it matter? Mary might laugh and talk, and flutter here and there—she was true to the core, and Frank knew it. On his side, though he painted all the beauties of the season, he never imagined one of them "came up to Mary," and Mary never imagined that he would think so.

Perhaps it was this perfect domestic atmosphere that had made Lady Mary able to attain her object. The best people were asked and came to her receptions, but also the best people had to be in some way distinguished, for the fashionable artist's wife was very dainty in her choice. The queer foreigners with doubtful titles were never found in her rooms. The Bohemian element was there certainly, but it was not fragile Bohemian glass which she displayed, but the glass which, though it may *look* fragile, is advertised as unbreakable.

We will not go so far as to say that all the guests who received the coveted invitation to No. 1 Ross Square were arrayed in spotless robes, but at all events none of them had been openly talked about—if they were erring mortals their errors were not notorious.

As to her person, Lady Mary Milton was decidedly pretty and *piquante*, but everything around her combined to increase her charms. Her dresses were designed by Frank, her hair was golden and her eyes were deep violet. Her manners were perfect, and were inherited as well as acquired, for she had known good society from the time she first opened her eyes on the wicked world; above all, these same good manners were not variable but ingrained, and therefore never found wanting.

All those charms in the natural order of events would only have raised her up enemies had she not possessed yet one more virtue—she adored her own sex, she was a woman's woman quite as much as a man's woman, and she had a heart. If she had not been born with the passion for good society, she would merely have been a pleasant English matron, but as it was she reigned as the favourite of society and gave herself airs in plenty, and to crown all it was her privilege to have these airs respected.

The Miltons lived at the corner house of Ross Square. Just then it was a very fashionable square, the houses were difficult to get hold of, and though comparatively small they were run after. The studio was in the garden, and considering the aristocratic sitters who came there it was very simple; but it suited the fashionable portrait painter, who was likewise very simple in his tastes.

Lady Mary's parties were never overcrowded.

She was resolute about this important item. Her receptions were not to be like the game of chairs, in which there are always less chairs than persons, and she never allowed a man to crowd up the doorway vainly seeking a new position for his legs and arms. The men and women who came to her house were asked there to talk to each other, to amuse each other, and to keep up the character of her unique parties; if they failed on second trial—she was merciful the first time and made allowances for English shyness—they never received, in spite of broad hints, another invitation. Lady Mary could do this though no one else could do it. It is certainly wonderful how much can be done by a man or a woman, if he or she has the necessary courage of their firm opinions, and if they allow the world to hear "a bit of their minds."

"Half the world wastes its brain power in saying what it does not mean," she would remark; "my advice is, 'say what you mean and do it.'"

But Lady Mary's maxims though good were not good enough for universal acceptance, because it is not only honesty of speech which succeeds, it requires also a mixture of luck. Mrs. Bellew, the mother of pretty Miss Bellew, had tried to imitate all Lady Mary's ways, and had failed utterly. Everybody was offended with her and cut her—that was all she got for her pains. It is best and kindest to mention this fact at once for fear of further imitation and further

failure, for to imitate this fashionable lady without her special talents is to court disappointment.

Lady Mary introduced her guests—when she did so at all—in the prettiest way imaginable; with a few words she could make people feel quite at ease with each other, but that again was her special gift which we have tried in vain to imitate.

The season was getting aged. The decorous squabbles of the artists had subsided after an unusual flood of adverse criticism by each other upon each other's work, and the society parties were abating. The fashionable world had only about two engagements for the same evening instead of three or four, and it was getting a little *blasé* and weary, but wearied as it might be it could still find enough spirit to attend Lady Mary's last reception. People could go there before going off to Mrs. Montresor's ball, a ball famous for its strange medley of guests, but to which "every one went." Those who came early to Lady Mary Milton's reception took care not to mention they were on their way to "Mrs. Montresor's mixture." The real enjoyment was to say at the ball to certain people, whom you knew could never cross her threshold, that you had "just come from Lady Mary Milton's reception." That was a real triumph, the triumph of, to speak plainly, morality over immorality, good over evil, and therefore it must be owned a very rare triumph, and one which has no written promise of immediate success to rest upon.

Lady Mary had triumphed over the world, would the world some day make her suffer for it? This question remained to be answered.

She was charming on this particular evening. Frank Milton had designed her "frock," as his wife called what he styled her "triumph of arts and manufactures." Her thirty-five years did not make themselves conspicuous, for she only allowed twenty-five out of the whole number to appear before the guests. Her hair, arranged artificially, was adorned with the smallest and most delicate wreath of real ivy. Her dress was of a pale sea-green, and was adorned also with natural ivy, causing her several times to be likened to a woodland nymph. As to her stature, she was short but well-proportioned; moreover, she had by inheritance beautiful hands and feet. To-night she was extremely lively, but she seldom failed in this respect for you never found Lady Mary running to several parties on one and the same evening. She gave as an excuse for her many refusals that she only knew how to be brilliant once a day. She accepted very few invitations, and certainly her popularity was not due to the frequency of her appearance in society, but rather, comet-like, to the uncertainty of her appearances, and to the agreeable surprise created when her presence was notified.

This evening the two drawing-rooms in Ross Square were thrown open, and looked like fairy-land. Flowers and ferns were mingled together, simplicity

and severe art, with just a touch besides of Eastern gorgeousness. Everything was perfect, neither vulgar nor mean.

The special entertainment provided by her ladyship was a child-violinist. He was to play two pieces and then to disappear. Lady Mary had a tender heart, she did not like show-children; but this infant prodigy was the rage, so she contrived as usual to use the world and not to abuse it. These two pieces she knew would have more success than if the child wearied himself and his audience with an hour's unceasing work.

The boy, Hector Prowton, was accompanied by his sister, a tall girl of twenty, dressed in black silk, whose sad face looked out of keeping with a lively party. After the first solo was finished she retired with Hector into a corner, in order to avoid as much as possible the notice of the guests.

As for Lady Mary, she moved about the room and kept the ball of amusing conversation gently rolling. The company was too well chosen for this ball to need much propelling power, indeed, only a gentle touch was now and then necessary to keep it in motion.

Mr. Milton had not his wife's talent for society talk, but he enjoyed a chat with anybody and everybody; he did not put on the airs of genius, and was happily able to be himself, that is, simple and straightforward.

We shall not pretend to reproduce the clever talk which made the success of the party at No. 1 Ross Square. You cannot paint a woman's kiss, nor the quick blush on a lovely cheek, nor a thousand things in real life, for art fails when she steps out of her province. This evening there was a network of sparkling repartee, a very Turkey carpet of rich thoughts woven with single threads; but there was only one guest, besides the *Wunderkind's* sister, who here seemed out of place—a thread, as it were, from another texture. He was sitting not far from the musician, and he had half a mind to address the silent sister, as he too knew no one in that gay society except Lady Mary herself; but before he could do this the latter had come across the room bringing with her, of course without apparent purpose, an elderly man who was, by her orders, to talk to the lonely guest, and to whom she said—

"May I introduce Mr. Leslie to you, Colonel Moore? He has just come back from Australia or New Zealand—which is it, Mr. Leslie?—and he is a distant cousin of mine. He knows nothing of English society, so I told him to come and see it this evening, but you will agree with me he is too late now for anything but the fag-end of our *beau monde*."

"But he will begin with the best first," said the Colonel, with a courtly bow to his hostess; being fully aware that dainty compliments help much to sweeten daily life.

"I only landed from New Zealand last night," said Brice Leslie, trying to rouse himself.

"He will give you his opinion of us, after the manner of the future New Zealander when found standing on the ruins of London," said Lady Mary.

"I was born an Englishman," said Leslie, smiling, "and it is only about ten years since I last trod English soil; I am not altogether a foreigner."

"Ten years, and you have never been back?" said the Colonel; it seemed to him a very long exile.

"Never; and even now I am enjoying the novel sensation of having landed in England unexpected by anyone—even by my own people. Strangely enough I was coming by the next boat, but having finished some surveying I was engaged in sooner than I expected I took the ship that was on the point of starting."

"He never even telegraphed," added Lady Mary, "so he is experiencing a new sensation. Is he not to be envied? How I wish I could do something to astonish Frank, but he is like the man who could never shiver—nothing I do surprises him. To punish the returned prodigal (all Colonials *are* prodigals of course) I invited him here. It is strange but true that I recognised a family likeness in the wanderer's face, when we were both in the same shop this morning; quite a theatrical scene it was, 'Surely you are Brice Leslie,' 'And are you Lady Mary Milton, my long-lost cousin?' Now, Colonel Moore, you can see

it all, I may drop the curtain. Will you act the part of Telemachus and tell him about everyone, point out what he is to admire and what to detest; I must go and talk to my *Wunderkind's* sister. Ah, by the way, Mr. Leslie, what do you think of that girl in pink on the other side of the room? If I remember rightly, ten years ago you were an ardent admirer of beauty."

"Ten years cures many foibles," said Brice Leslie earnestly. In spite of his having been ten years in New Zealand there was nothing colonial in his manner unless we except its gravity. He was tall, broad-shouldered, with a fair complexion tanned by sun and air. Now and then there flitted across his face a look of keen perception, which it was a pleasure to note. It had pleased Lady Mary, or, cousin though he was, he would not have been at her reception. His thoughtful expression was occasionally dispersed by a sudden gleam of amusement, which showed hidden forces at work, and which proved him to be a man not easily passed over when once you had looked at him.

"Yes; and ten years also gives time to contract new faults," replied the hostess.

"Have pity on my grey hairs," interposed the Colonel.

"But really one of you must give me an opinion on my pretty Miss Betham—a true Greek face I call it, so pure and simple."

"Were the Greeks pure and simple, Lady Mary? I am merely asking for information," said the Colonel.

"She is very pretty," said Brice Leslie, but no gleam of admiration came into his eyes.

"Very pretty? You men are past my comprehension. I gather together the most unique, the most charming maidens of nineteen for you, and you say 'very pretty.'"

"We say far more when the girl of nineteen mentions Lady Mary," said the Colonel; and Leslie admired the *aplomb* of the grey-haired soldier and courtier.

Lady Mary laughed, she liked compliments because she knew exactly what they were worth,—she could beat even the Colonel in that line when she chose.

"You are a born courtier, Colonel Moore. By the way, do you know that Miss Cuthbert is to be here this evening? She is late, so I expect she has been elsewhere. I fight against that habit and never give in to it."

"Is Miss Cuthbert another pink beauty of nineteen?" asked Brice Leslie quietly; that unconscious irony of his was a great charm in women's eyes.

"Oh no; a woman of a certain age—say of my age."

"Let us call it the usual age, then," said the Colonel.

"What claim has she on your notice and regard, Lady Mary?" said Leslie, for he had quickly found out that his cousin was a woman who expected something from each of her guests.

"Well, she is—no, I will not tell you, you will see for yourself. . . . The *Wunderkind* must wait till she comes, for she adores music."

Lady Mary passed on, and the two men were left alone in a crowd.

The Colonel knew everyone, and the newly-returned Englishman knew no one, but the Colonel was a good-natured man and he admired the calm way in which the New Zealander took his good fortune, so he began—

"I suppose you know that Lady Mary Milton is the most popular hostess in town?" Then he suddenly broke off. "Look," he added, "there is Miss Cuthbert coming in. The deuce!" this exclamation was uttered *sotto voce*—"Isn't she handsome?"

CHAPTER II.

MAGDALEN CUTHBERT entered the room accompanied by her aunt, as Mrs. Stewart was called, though she was really only a chaperon, a useful person for appearances, a mere nobody who did not count for much. Mrs. Stewart had all the virtues said to belong to a faithful dog; she was quite content to be nobody, and she was nobody when Miss Cuthbert was by.

Lady Mary knew what she was about when she asked Miss Cuthbert to her receptions. She knew the handsome woman was talked about, but she also knew that the talk was not such as could close the doors of No. 1 Ross Square against her. Further, Lady Mary did not even hide it from herself or from Frank that in her secret heart she was one of Miss Cuthbert's many admirers, or rather one of her few women admirers, for the men were too many to count. When Lady Mary had told Brice Leslie that the expected guest was of the same age as herself, she had been lenient to Magdalen Cuthbert. In reality she was a woman just touching forty, but a woman is no older than she looks, and Magdalen did not often look her age. At times you could not guess it at all, having too great a

personality for the number of her years to be of much consequence. The young girls, pink-and-white creatures of eighteen to twenty, did not much appreciate the entrance of Miss Cuthbert into a drawing-room. She seemed to fill the place, and her influence appeared to permeate everywhere. She was so handsome that mere beauty of youth or mere prettiness of feature faded away in her presence and was as nothing in comparison, for besides being naturally handsome Miss Cuthbert knew how to dress well; indeed, she dressed extremely well, neither in too old nor too young a style, being endowed with an artist's eye as to what personally suited her.

Brice Leslie, looking across the room, was suddenly transformed from the phlegmatic New Zealander to a human being with a new gleam of interest in the life around him, an interest previously conspicuous by its absence. As he watched Miss Cuthbert closely he found it difficult to describe her verbally to himself. He saw she was tall, well made, full in figure, but so exquisitely proportioned that the word stout could not be applied to her; there was, however, something more than mere beauty which constituted her special attraction, and this something refused to be defined.

If a man happened to have a predilection for a tiny woman, it was no use enumerating Miss Cuthbert's charms to him, for no amount of art could make her look small. She was the type of fully-developed womanhood. Her pose, her walk, all her movements

were so graceful, that one realised without further analysis that she was exactly what she should be. Unless you are an artist or a sculptor or a doctor or an anatomist, you do not dissect a woman's stature, you simply comply with the natural desire to acknowledge perfection wherever and in whatever form you find it. Arrayed in her low cut evening dress, Miss Cuthbert's chief beauty was seen to perfection. Her head was perfectly poised on her rounded throat. It was not like a girl's slender neck with that serpent-like twist so much admired by a certain school, but the rounded, finely-proportioned throat of a Hebe, starting from its base in one splendid curve that one could mentally trace as it swept round the outline of her exquisitely-shaped head.

Her hair had, as it seemed, conspired to repeat the undulating lines of the head, for its meshes resembled dark waves in the act of turning to break upon the shore. Her eyes were of a pure pale blue, but shaded by deep brown eyelashes that matched the colour of her hair. This effect of blue eyes with rich brown fringes was very charming; moreover, the rich healthy complexion, with its dash of red colouring, was peculiarly striking. Her nose was straight, her mouth the despair of artists; Miss Cuthbert's lips had once been described by a society paper as "a cupid's bow dipped in carmine, which when bent to send forth its winged arrows was sure to conquer." The description was "fine" but not true. Her lips were in reality rather

thin, red certainly, but when at rest there was a sad, severe expression about the mouth which did not altogether belong to a perfect type of beauty. When, however, she suddenly smiled or spoke of some subject which pleased her, the transformation produced perfection. That smile was extremely dangerous, it seemed to lift the beholder of it into another world, it expressed a thousand things in one and one in a thousand; for the whole face felt the smile, especially the eyes, which sometimes shared the sadness and severity of the mouth. No circumstance could ever make Miss Cuthbert's eyes anything but beautiful, but even they changed their expression when "Cupid's bow" was really parted by smiles.

Perhaps it was for this reason that Miss Cuthbert was not chary of her smiles in society, indeed some men thought she was a perfect woman only *because* of that smile. You could find heaps of handsome women said they, but no one who could smile like "the Magdalen," so they irreverently called her amongst themselves with unintentional flippancy, for men's minds are shaped after another pattern to that of the other sex.

Lady Mary Milton admired cleverness wherever she found it, and she admired it especially in Magdalen Cuthbert. It was so evident, so ready for use, and so easily displayed, for she possessed a memory that would have made her senior classic had she chosen to walk in academic groves.

We need not, at this moment, enumerate the rest of Magdalen's attractions. She was a thorough woman —a very woman of women, even though her mind possessed such masculine strength. A woman should never be catalogued like drawing-room furniture, for she is the compound, not only of a thousand inherited beauties, but also of ages of weakness, and a mere catalogue can in no way define such niceties.

Brice Leslie was fascinated at first sight. He had gazed at all Lady Mary's society beauties without feeling his pulse beat quicker, or his eye charmed above its normal condition in their presence; but the entrance of that one woman, no longer young, had roused his interest and his curiosity. When at last she had been hidden in the crowd by several guests, Brice turned to his companion.

"Who is she?" he said very calmly, secretly ashamed of feeling excited.

"Well, we all know her, but personally I can tell you very little about her. Her father died some ten years ago, he lived a quiet life, had a nice little house of his own, and a moderate fortune. He much admired his daughter—as we all do. Now he is dead she lives in the same house, has the same income, and the same chaperon."

"Why did she never marry?" said Brice slowly; he was afraid of showing his interest, though he wanted to hear all about her—everything.

"Well, that's what we all say, or we *used* to say it,

but— Humph, you are a newcomer, a New Zealander. If you want to know the answer, I will give you the best advice I can. Try and make love to her, and if you get the opportunity make her an offer. You won't be the first who has tried—and failed. By Jove, she's not a chicken, and she'll die an old maid—I call it cheating nature of her rights. Confess you have seldom seen a handsomer woman."

"We have fine specimens in New Zealand," said Brice Leslie carelessly. He had not the courage to say, "Yes, the handsomest woman I have ever seen, whatever her age may be." Then he added, "Do you mean to say that all have failed? Isn't there—"

"Yes, all. Karstairs failed, and if you know Karstairs— Ah, I forgot you have been an absentee."

"I know no one," said Brice, this time almost coldly, and as if the subject of Miss Cuthbert bored him.

"Karstairs is a lady's-man. His manner is almost irresistible."

"But she resisted?"

"Would have nothing to say to him—nothing. We had betted on it, so we took an interest in the result, you see."

"I shouldn't have betted on it."

"No? Prudent by nature, perhaps? I shall go and talk to her: apart from bets and all that, she is very good company. As to cleverness she beats Lady

Mary hollow, and the greater wonder is that her little ladyship does not mind."

"All women are not jealous of their own sex. I used to think so, but I know better now. It is one of our foolish masculine ideas."

"Ah—well—perhaps."

The Colonel, quite unconvinced, stuck an eye-glass into one eye and began to thread his way through the first drawing-room, but before he could accomplish the journey the child violinist was led to his seat, and after a few squeaks from his instrument, a few chords from the shy sister, the music began. The guests sat down, and Brice caught sight of Miss Cuthbert seated between two small women. The smile had disappeared, the lips were pressed together, the eyes had in them a far-away expression, and the corners of the mouth showed a slight droop. To his surprise Brice now saw another woman before him; he had admired the first Miss Cuthbert—he was startled by this one. "One would say she has suffered," he thought. "Or is it simply that she is listening to that boy? Shall I ask for an introduction? Perhaps I had better not, why not? No—yes—humbug. A woman's not a girl, especially a woman who can understand, and who will not marry. If it were possible, that is the woman I should— Hang it, that boy will never stop."

He took out his watch. "If he stops in five minutes I'll get my cousin to introduce me, if not—

I won't." This was a strange compact with his second nature, but not an unusual one for a man to make.

The child musician played on. His little pale cheeks flushed, his small hands moved faster and faster, and his bow seemed to be an evil spirit bent on mischief. His pathetic eyes were not in a London drawing-room, but far away—very far in the mysterious realms of music. He had played his best; it was wonderful, his soul had gone into it—a soul which seemed too small to contain all his thoughts; it surely would break its bonds and fly away—right away, but where? Now at last the long selection was drawing to its close. It seemed as if the furies were pursuing the child-spirit, but there was just a chance that they would be defeated and that the little one would conquer. The Erlking would not get him, neither would his cruel daughter clasp her cold arms around him. Suddenly he struck the last chord, and it was one of triumph and of joy. The struggle was at an end, and pale with emotion the child moved away from the piano.

Brice looked at his watch, only one second was wanting to the five-minutes' probation.

"The Fates have it so," he said, smiling, "and for one night what can it matter?" He rose from his seat and made his way direct to Lady Mary's corner. His determined manner and straightforward purpose had attracted Miss Cuthbert's attention even before

Lady Mary came up to her, at Brice Leslie's special request, to introduce them to each other.

"Miss Cuthbert will be charmed, I am sure," the hostess said, and then turning towards her friend she added: "Magdalen, my dear, here is a gentleman who wishes to be introduced to you. A cousin, or a sort of cousin of mine, moreover a New Zealander. You like natural curiosities, don't you? and a man who has been away ten years from London society is one certainly. Mr. Leslie, Miss Cuthbert."

"I do feel strangely out of my element," Brice Leslie said, bowing to her, whilst Lady Mary added—

"I see Miss Cuthbert is still thinking of my genius."

Magdalen stood up and bowed. Standing close beside each other they looked a very handsome pair, and some of Magdalen's men friends noticed the fact, wondering who was being introduced to her, for evidently he was a new recruit.

"Yes, it was wonderful for a child."

"I knew you would be pleased," said Lady Mary, smiling, and then she moved away leaving the two together.

"He will be a great man, don't you think?" she said, turning to Brice, who saw the smile had come back to her lips, so that the face was once more illuminated. Brice was in secret delight. To himself he said: "I never met such a woman before—how strange she is not married!" aloud he answered—

"I am not musical, to me it seemed as if the little fellow went on for a long time; I thought he would never end."

"Oh!" said Magdalen Cuthbert. Her eyes expressed all the scorn and the surprise she felt; but the expression was only momentary, like a sudden overshadowing of the sun by a summer cloud; indeed, Brice did not see it, only he heard the altered tone of her voice. He was just then only conscious that in the space of five minutes he had balanced the pros and cons, and that Fate—Brice called it Fate—had decided he should now be close to her, and that he should be speaking to her.

"I shall be very soon disenchanted," he said to himself, for he did not believe in sudden attraction; "and besides—"

"You are musical; I hear from your tone that you have no pity for a man who has none of the divine feeling."

"Pity? That is hardly the word. If he acknowledges it at once, as you have done, I know that I need not waste my breath in trying to do the impossible. I am really grateful to him. But, before you came up, Austin Dobson's words were ringing in my ears."

"I am sorry I do not know his poems. You forget that I come from underground!"

"I am glad you do," she said, turning a little towards him and for the first time looking up into his

face; "one gets to know so well the ideas of most people, and one wearies of them a little." The smile that accompanied these words took out a little of their sting, but added somewhat to their mockery. Suddenly her expression changed again; was there a dimness in her eyes as she added: "If you do not know Austin Dobson's 'Child Musician,' make haste and read it. It is a little poem full of pure pathos; I have hated to listen to a *Wunderkind*, as Lady Mary calls this one, ever since I read it."

"You have a good memory. Will you say it?"

"It is easy to remember. I—I am sorry for it sometimes—some things run in one's head till one would beg for oblivion, if one only knew whom to ask."

"I have not got a good verbal memory, but I can minutely remember some scenes I have gone through."

Magdalen Cuthbert once more gave him a quick glance. Her glance had nothing coy about it, she seemed to do everything with a certain directness of purpose, and yet, at the same time, her actions appeared spontaneous. This man's face interested her, for she smiled at his remark. Often as not she merely looked bored if the speaker were not amusing.

"Well, then, perhaps these lines will run in your brain as they have done in mine. By the way, I hope no one is listening, or they would think it strange to hear verses quoted at a reception, unless, indeed, one called oneself a professional reciter."

Then she said in a low tone but speaking with a perfect intonation—

"'He had played for his lordship's levee,
He had played for her ladyship's whim,
Till the poor little head was heavy
And the poor little brain would swim.

"And the face grew peaked and eerie,
And the large eyes strange and bright,
And they said—too late—"He is weary!
He shall rest for, at least, to-night!"'

"There are two more verses, but I could not say them, they are too pathetic."

"One can guess the rest of the story," said Brice Leslie; "thank you." She ought to have been an actress, he thought, as he looked furtively at her. He seemed altogether fascinated, though she had said so few words. He had admired the pathos in her voice as she repeated those few lines, and the quick look of sympathy she had cast across the room to where the boy violinist sat demurely trying to answer the foolish remarks of a guest. Brice was indulging in this train of pleasant thoughts, forgetting he ought to make conversation, when suddenly Miss Cuthbert's mood changed. She opened her large fan and laughed gaily, but there was a hardness in the laugh that immediately grated on Brice Leslie's feelings. He had fancied Miss Cuthbert was always as she had been the moment before.

"As you see us again after ten years—by us, I mean society—I wonder what you think of it all.

The season is nearly over; strange that we are not sick to death of it, but somehow we manage to keep up to the end. We are in at the death and ride off the field with colours flying. Excuse a double metaphor."

"If you are sick to death of it, I wonder you go on with it," said Brice Leslie quietly. His very tone seemed in itself a kind of reproof.

"Do you wonder?—I do not. By force of repetition, one gets to think it the most important thing one can do. I know I do."

"You do! I should have thought. . . . I suppose however, that is a *façon de parler*, and I am not clever enough to understand you."

"If I did not see you were guiltless of sarcasm, I should say you had just said a cutting thing very neatly."

"I am afraid ten years of a lonely and wandering life have not taught me an unknown tongue. I never learnt to be sarcastic."

"Never? Well, you have lost a good deal of pleasure."

"I doubt it—I beg your pardon. I noticed that Colonel Moore could turn off a compliment out of any of Lady Mary Milton's words. I am quite unequal to the task, so, of course, quite unfit for brilliant society."

Miss Cuthbert turned her blue eyes upon him again, and the sarcasm faded from her face. Brice had a look which defied sarcasm. He had known

much of life, he was to know more, but he had always been entirely in earnest—for the time at least.

"I am very glad. I hope we shall meet again; perhaps we shall. Lady Mary is going down to her country-house soon, and she has asked me to spend a few weeks with her. I love the country, in spite of living nearly always in London."

"You are obliged to live in town?"

"Obliged, oh no! I always go away after the season is over, but I must live in London; I should miss the constant excitement, the parties, the—the World, in fact. One lives a life apart here, and one gets attached to it."

Brice Leslie said a little dreamily, "Ah, yes, perhaps." The last words had depressed him. He hated women of this stamp, and he was almost glad that at that instant a dashing young guardsman came up to Miss Cuthbert and claimed her attention. Young men were always attracted to her; she flattered their vanity, and possessed the power to charm them with her varied talk, her easy flow, her sarcastic remarks. Brice moved away to leave his place to the younger man, and he did it without a pang. "Not the woman I took her for," he thought. "Shallow, worldly, everything else a mere pretence." But gradually he found himself again looking towards her, watching how she left the guardsman in order to charm another young officer, who was not afraid to let his voice be heard. Now and then Miss Cuthbert's answers

reached Leslie's ears. People talk of balm to a wounded spirit; her remarks were more like the application of vinegar to a sore, and Brice Leslie said to himself—.

"She is beautiful, very beautiful, but I wonder how I could for a moment have compared her with Griselda?"

CHAPTER III.

It sounds well to talk with familiarity of the ways of society, but society is extremely dull unless you belong to its charmed circle. Brice Leslie found that after Miss Cuthbert moved away no one spoke to him, and he seemed figuratively and literally a being from another world. Presently he found himself in Mr. Milton's studio, which had been thrown open this evening, but which had served chiefly as a suitable place for sipping champagne cup and partaking of dainty refreshments. It was a studio with nooks and corners in it, and having sauntered to its farthest end, where a bank of flowers had been artistically arranged against a screen, Mr. Leslie by chance found himself again face to face with Miss Cuthbert. She was in earnest and lively conversation with a barrister. Brice at once recognised the man of law by the smooth chin, the keen eyes, the satirical smile, and the look of cool admiration he was bestowing on his companion. Miss Cuthbert was just then in a brilliant mood. She was discussing the last society novel written by Grey Maston.

"Uncommonly good," said the barrister; "not a

bad picture either of the times; I rather fancy Grey Maston took the plot from a much-talked-of case—you know the one I am referring to?"

"Oh yes; Mrs. Twinhaven's elopement with Lord Fookes," said Miss Cuthbert calmly. "Do you remember the sensation it made, Mr. Leslie?" she added, turning towards Brice.

To anyone who knew him well, which was not the case here, it would have been apparent that his countenance changed, and that the studied gravity of his answer was not merely put on for the occasion, but was the index of deeper thought.

"I have been in New Zealand for ten years, so if it is a recent scandal I am not likely to know it."

Miss Cuthbert laughed; her laugh was peculiar to herself—a short, dry laugh, and to Brice it sounded intensely sad and shallow.

"I suppose you are also a pre-Zola man."

"Yes."

Her words stung him and so did the amused smile on the barrister's face. Magdalen again looked up at him as she closed her fan with a quick movement of impatience.

"I see you really are a revivified primeval man. You will have much to learn if you take up your quarters in London."

"Miss Cuthbert knows us all by heart," said the barrister. "She puts her finger on all our failings and has no mercy—on man—" Then he politely

gave up his seat to Brice Leslie and walked away. Brice was angry, so he still remained standing, only he could not help looking down upon that mass of beautiful dark wavy hair, and upon the arch of the white neck. He could even just see the exquisite smile, not the less beautiful because it was now so scornful. She spoke first.

"Won't you sit down? Lady Mary can do nearly everything, but she cannot prevent her rooms becoming hot. Here it is delicious. Unfortunately I have discovered this spot just when it is nearly time to go home."

"I heard some one mention a ball; are you going to it?" said Leslie, not knowing what appropriate subject to talk about.

"I don't dance, but I often go and watch the follies of others. So you do not read naughty books?"

"I read very little of anything. I have had a life of hard work, an out-of-door life. I was surveying for a company during most of the time I was out in New Zealand, and I have been far from books—except books in flesh and blood."

"Were they exciting?"

"One of these life stories was a sad one, and my heart was in it, so I cannot laugh about it as you can about scandal."

Brice wanted to punish Miss Cuthbert for some of her scornful remarks.

"Oh, you are going to be in earnest. Spare your-

self the trouble, it is hardly worth while in London society."

"So I see."

"You are not a very discerning man. You must learn that society says, 'Then love me all in all or not at all.'"

"False, shallow-hearted woman," thought Brice; "and yet, at this moment she would make the fortune of an artist. Why on earth should I think about her?" He looked towards the opposite end of the studio.

"Shall I take you back to the drawing-room?" he asked.

Magdalen Cuthbert laughed.

"You are delightful. Do you know, Mr. Leslie, that you have not yet concealed one thought during your entrance into this charmed circle? You must add yourself to the collection on the shelf of living books easily studied."

"I was in earnest at all events."

"So is Zola—terribly in earnest, if that is all one requires."

"You talk lightly of such things as elopements," said Brice, feeling that he was dashing his head against a wall of adamant, "but if you had known a story that I could tell you—"

"We know heaps of them," laughed Magdalen, flinging her fan open again. "I assure you *that* is not an original topic, indeed we have taken to telling

ghost stories to vary our subject. Mr. Greg was amusing me just now with one—authentic, of course. By the way, the one thing a lawyer will not believe in is an authentic story, but some of their divorce trials are quite as extraordinary as ghost stories."

Brice Leslie lost all patience with her.

"I see I am not made for your kind of society, Miss Cuthbert. Your people are never in earnest. I was going to tell you that when I first went to New Zealand, I made friends with a man who in his own person had proved many of the ordinarily received notions—received in society, I mean—"

"Yes, society with a big, big S."

Brice did not notice the interruption, and Magdalen, accustomed to notice, at the same moment resented and admired the omission.

"And had proved them to be false. He had himself acted out one of your society novels—"

"I don't write novels."

"And, as I say, he had proved it utterly false."

"You mean, he *said* so."

"No, I got to know that man as well or better than if he had been my brother, and I know he would have given worlds to have—"

Magdalen laughed.

"Forgive me, Mr. Leslie; you would do so if you only knew how strange your words sound to me. I fancy I am reading a novel with a purpose."

"Which would seem rubbish to you."

Magdalen laughed again.

"Certainly," she said.

Brice Leslie felt inclined to throttle this splendid impersonification of heartless scepticism. He threw all the scorn he possessed into his voice. He was not mollified even by seeing Magdalen rise slowly from her bower of ferns and flowers and place a perfectly-shaped arm and hand upon the base of a pure white marble Venus. He knew, as well as if she had said so, that she was posing, that she had studied that attitude, and that she was well aware how grand she looked with that expression of amused scorn flashing from her dark-fringed blue eyes. But the man was not equal to the woman in *sang froid;* he lost his temper, or something like it. He forgot he was in society, forgot he had never seen this society lady before, forgot there are rules of courtesy and etiquette which cannot be broken, forgot that it is vulgar—perhaps he never knew it—to show your true feeling, or to express a strong opinion about anything. Brice forgot all that, forgot that he had even admired her, both for her perfection of form and for the depth of kindly sympathy in her blue eyes when she had looked at the tired child musician, and knitting his brows, he said bitterly, being at this moment quite off his guard—

"What is earnest to a man is often foolishness to a woman—like you. If you had known Percy Chester's story, you would—"

Brice's sudden anger had caused him as he spoke

to turn half away from Miss Cuthbert; but an unexplainable reason, some vibration of the unseen magnetic current, suddenly and unconsciously caused him to turn round to look at her. He stopped short from intense surprise. The woman who a moment before had angered him was utterly changed. The daring scornful look in her eyes was replaced by one of intense agony and of dumb despair. Her face had become deadly pale, and the hand that held her fan trembled visibly, whilst the other fell as if powerless by her side. At that instant several couples came slowly towards them, and the danger of discovery evidently caused Miss Cuthbert, on the spur of the moment, to find words. In a low, indistinct voice she said—

"Give me your arm, please, and take me back to the drawing-room."

Brice Leslie obeyed in silence. Another man might have talked on to hide her confusion or might lightly have continued the story; but Brice did neither of these things—he did as she told him, and said nothing. He felt the weight of her arm on his, and she knew she was leaning on him for support. He did not argue or wonder to himself what he had said to cause this emotion, or what was the matter with her. He was bewildered, and yet there seemed to come over him a feeling of intense sympathy with this woman whom three minutes before he had almost hated. At this instant, if she had asked him to put his hand into

the fire for her, he would have done it unquestioningly.

Before they had reached the small flight of steps leading to the drawing-room Magdalen Cuthbert paused.

"I am feeling unwell. Will you do me a kindness? find my carriage and my friend, Mrs. Stewart; ask Lady Mary to point her out to you and to excuse me; let no fuss be made. Can I—yes, I can trust you."

It was quite like Brice Leslie to say nothing, but to obey. He led her to the cloak-room, then hastened away and executed all her commissions with wonderful tact and precision. Lady Mary was too much engaged with her guests to question him, and Mrs. Stewart was easily found. Before many moments had gone by he was again standing silently by Magdalen's side, whilst Mrs. Stewart filled up the pause of silence by saying—

"You have not got over your bad cold, Magdalen, dear; I knew you would be tired. How kind of Mr. Leslie to see about our carriage."

Magdalen walked on and did not answer till the door was flung open, and the cool June air blew softly upon them. It was a lovely starlight night, such a night as would waft a poet into a dream of bliss, a young man into joyful thoughts of love, a woman into a vision-land of not-to-be-realised happiness, and a child to heaven.

She paused to allow Mrs. Stewart to go first; then

she loosed Brice Leslie's arm, saying in a very low voice—

"Good-night, thank you. One moment, I must see you again; when, where?"

Brice had gone through several phases since he had experienced the renewed feeling of sympathy for the beautiful Miss Cuthbert. He even began to fancy she was acting all this little play to entice him. What was the matter? What had he said or done to excite her? What did she mean by all this piece of splendid acting? Now was the time to revenge himself. Partly from this feeling, and partly from a certain stolidity which often manifested itself in him, partly also because his ideas sometimes moved slowly, and that he was already reproaching himself for being where he was, he answered in the most ordinary and matter-of-fact tone—

"I cannot say, for I must leave town to-morrow. You see, Miss Cuthbert, you have shown me how unfit I am for modern society."

The next moment he regretted his words, but it was too late. He saw Miss Cuthbert bite her lip; he saw her rise to her full height; he saw how she mentally pulled herself together and flung back his punishment with supreme scorn.

"On the contrary, your last speech shows you are well fitted to crush its few genuine impulses. Good-night."

She barely gave him her hand, and then all was

over. The carriage door shut, the coachman drove off, the footmen closed the front door, and Brice Leslie slowly walked upstairs ready to hate himself for his words and more for his actions. Here the move was being made by the remaining guests, and last words were being exchanged. Brice saw everything as if he were in a London fog; Lady Mary's sparkling last sallies sounded dull after Miss Cuthbert's strong words, and he felt like a despicable fool.

"I must go," he said, when at last he could claim the attention of his hostess.

"No, wait a moment. The exodus has begun, but you are entitled to the privilege of a relation."

He obeyed, he felt too bewildered to disobey, and only woke up to this fact when Lady Mary's happy laugh roused him, while at the same time Mr. Milton put his hand on his shoulder.

"Well, Leslie, what do you think of Mary's party? Splendid success. Lady Coombe was charmed, and Ewart, you know the famous Ewart, said it was the first party this season he had enjoyed. But it's her last. Now for the country—Hampshire and Surrey lanes. I get my turn after Mary, for in this world it generally seems to be, 'ladies first.'"

"I like that! Why, Frank, you enjoyed yourself amazingly. But tell me, my New Zealander, what do you think of your return to civilised life and to civilised men and women?"

"It is very strange," said Brice slowly, and Lady Mary laughed like a girl.

"Charming! Your originality would make you a social success."

"So you leave us to-morrow?" said the artist.

"Yes, I'm going down home. By the way, I have not said how much obliged I am to you, and how kind I think it of you to have asked me here to-night."

"Not at all. Do you know that you made yourself conspicuous by being the chosen knight?"

"Chosen knight! Whose?"

"Come now. Don't be too much the barbarian. A mixture of it, I grant you, is necessary for success, but we do require a small amount of European clothing on the fashionable aborigines. Don't you know that Magdalen Cuthbert honoured you with her notice?"

"With some biting sarcasm," said Brice, but wishing as he maligned her that he could see her standing once more near the Venus with her arm on the marble pedestal.

"Charming! What did you say to bring it upon you? But don't be cast down. I assure you some of the men prefer her in that mood. Not Frank, he never makes anything of her, he is quite unfair to her."

"She poses," said Mr. Milton slowly, and trying to hide a yawn. "Splendid woman, you know. I'd pay her to sit for me and all that, but to live with. . . .

Heaven preserve us! She has a devil of a temper, I'm sure. Those frowns mean something, or I'm not an artist of the human face."

"A woman without a temper—what is she, Frank?" retorted his wife. "You are asking for a balloon without gas or an engine without steam. You know very well that my temper helps us to live amicably together. Well, I am sorry to lose you so soon, Mr. Leslie. Let me see, what does your home consist of now? Your mother and father of course, and how many sisters? You will only be about ten miles from Rosehill, our country house."

"I have but one sister, who lives at home and is much taken up with nursing my invalid father; my mother is dead. If we are neighbours I might look you up in the country. You have taught me town life, let me learn rural existence under your guidance."

"He's getting on, isn't he, Frank? By all means. Ah, I have it. You have heard that Magdalen Cuthbert is coming to stay with us. Good heavens! Brice Leslie, don't be so transparent. I could have taught you better, but now I'm sleepy. By all means come. The Magdalen appears on the first of August. Say you come on the fifth."

"Thank you," said Brice.

"Then that is an understood thing. Good-night."

When Brice Leslie was gone Lady Mary turned towards her husband.

"Tell it not in Gath, Frank. I've taken a bet that Magdalen will be married this year. Now, don't interfere, for I mean to succeed."

"What nonsense! Pray don't meddle with that woman's affairs."

"What is more—I fancy this New Zealander may be the man. Wait and see."

CHAPTER IV.

MAGDALEN CUTHBERT'S house was in Wilton Crescent; it was not large but it was very comfortable, and amply sufficed for her needs, her visitors not being numerous. Her father had been an only son, and she was his only child. On her mother's side she had one married aunt, whose children came occasionally to stay with her. Magdalen was fond of her cousins, and they kindly allowed her to do a good deal for them; for their father, the Rev. Benjamin Watson, was a poor man and found his means quite inadequate to his expenses. He is a happy being who has no poor relations. Magdalen's cousins came when it was convenient to themselves, and left her alone when they did not want anything; but she never resented their conduct, for she had an exaggerated idea of blood relationship. For years before his death her father had been a great invalid. Always a bookworm, he had, even before he fell ill, refused to exert himself, so he had found Mrs. Stewart, the widow of a spendthrift admiral, to come and chaperon his daughter when she first grew up.

Things were apt to become institutions in that

household, and Mrs. Stewart had followed the general rule. She had remained there ever since, and having taking kindly to society, which she accepted in a sleepy manner, she made herself very comfortable and very happy in spite of having so little in common with Magdalen Cuthbert. It need hardly be said that, when younger, Magdalen had ruled her, and she did so still. Mrs. Stewart knew Miss Cuthbert's peculiarities so well that now she hardly noticed them. Magdalen liked to be left alone, and was given to long fits of silence. Mrs. Stewart said "it was all the result of *that affair*," but added that "she had always been a strong-willed woman, and would now always remain so." The fashion had begun for people to talk a good deal about heredity. Mrs. Stewart, who was old-fashioned, thought it a curious subject to discuss in society, but as a result of this doctrine she supposed that no one was now answerable for their virtues or their vices, so it naturally followed that Magdalen was exempt from blame, and besides, when all her faults were enumerated, she was as generous a woman as you could find. The widow was not given to analysing character, she divided her life between going to parties and knitting at home. She knitted for "the indigent," as she expressed it, and considering how much she got through in a year it was really wonderful any deserving poor went barefooted, for she was anxious to announce that she only knitted for the deserving.

Magdalen gave Mrs. Stewart more love than she received from her, but the outward expression of it was a little uncertain. There were long intervals when Mrs. Stewart's presence seemed to her unbearable, just because she was there and could not be got rid of. On the other hand, had Miss Cuthbert found a suitable opportunity of sending away her companion, she would not have taken advantage of it.

This evening, for instance, she would have given ten pounds to have driven home alone, but she could not drop her old friend out of the window, so she did the next best thing and treated her as if she were not there. Wrapped in her white shawl she leant back in the brougham, and tried to still the beating of her heart by tightly folding her arms across it, as if physical pain were the cause of her mental agony. When she reached home she went upstairs as soon as possible, and dismissing her maid locked the door; then, drawing the curtain back, threw herself into an armchair to marshal the wild thoughts that made every pulse vibrate and every nerve acutely sensitive. And all this agitation was caused by the sound of those two words—"Percy Chester!"

"He knew him—knew him out there. How could I have expected it? New Zealand is such a big place. He was his friend; he knew *her* too, perhaps. I must, I must hear more about him. Fool that I am, after all these years, and yet I only saw his name once in the papers—that was bad enough; but now, here, in Lon-

don, I meet a man who knew him, knew *him*—O God! and I never guessed it."

She seemed to be suffocating, and rose quickly to throw up the window sash. Her window looked out upon the Square, which was silent now except for the occasional rattle of a passing cab. The evening breeze blew softly about her waving hair, and the moonlight rested on the face and neck of the beautiful woman. She was alone now—alone, and she could afford to be natural. Her ordinary life, and she knew it well, was one great piece of acting. She had studied her words, her looks, her very attitudes, till studied life seemed the most natural part of her existence. She was such a complex woman—not more so perhaps than thousands of other human beings; but she realised it more, and in that she suffered more than those who are willing to let the passing hour or even the passing minute guide them. Magdalen was not like such; she argued from one standpoint, and that standpoint was Percy Chester.

That story which touched her to the quick came back to her this evening in almost all its freshness. Her strong nature, like all strong natures, could suffer acutely from the memory of the past and from anticipation; but she also possessed in a great degree that capacity for happiness which cold-blooded people can never understand. Even now, as she impatiently opened a drawer and seized a packet of letters, taking from one of them a man's photograph, Magdalen's

face changed suddenly; she forgot everything that was sad, and as she gazed at the portrait, an exquisite look of happiness passed over her face. She saw Percy Chester as she had first known him and loved him. She remembered what she had been herself—not a woman like the present Magdalen Cuthbert, but another Magdalen—an intensely loving, passionate, generous-hearted woman—a woman of twenty-five, with every good impulse ready to increase a thousandfold in the sunshine of happiness, ready to sacrifice herself where she loved, and to be forgiving where she hated,—a woman as well able to admire as to scorn, and to despise all that was mean, ungenerous, and sinful.

That Magdalen had thought little of her beauty; indeed she had hardly realised its power, perhaps even in those early days it had not been quite as striking as it now was. Then she had been capable of loving, but now it seemed as if she were incapable of it, and that she had only a capacity for hating. Then she had hidden nothing of her great love, she had not cared to hide it. This Percy with his handsome face, his fascinating manners, his conscious power, his calm possession, his assured belief in himself, his touch of the adventurous, had seemed created to captivate Magdalen Cuthbert. She was not a nature that was easily won. The resisting force had been closely allied to the passionate element, as yet hardly developed in her, but this resistance had been her charm.

Before knowing her Percy had won love easily and often. Without having got into serious scrapes, or at all events into any of which the world was cognizant, he had somehow managed to imbibe the idea that he need only put forth his power of fascination in order to conquer.

Magdalen Cuthbert had crossed his path, and her unusual beauty, even then differing utterly from the pink-and-white simpering type of womanhood, had entirely fascinated him. He had paused, admired, and in spite of this she had appeared unconscious of his meaning. He felt piqued, he returned to the attack and determined to lay siege in good earnest. But it is dangerous to play at this game. Cupid may often be represented as a naked cherub handling a bow that would not kill a sparrow, but his appearance is deceptive; this pigmy is certainly the oldest inhabitant of the world, and his power is altogether disproportionate to his size. In playing with that fire, which in the beginning only just warmed him, Percy had been first singed, then scorched, then lastly he had fancied his whole happiness depended in winning the love of this perfect woman. He had not in the least understood her character, but he worshipped the visible perfection. He had learnt constancy for her sake, and he had added truth to his former powers of fascination, being now fully aware of the worth of the prize. Magdalen was a beautiful woman, but strange to say she had never been in love before. One morning she

awoke to the realisation of the meaning of the word love, to the sweet agony of being absorbed by one idea, to the knowledge that she could and would sacrifice herself, if necessary, for Percy Chester's good.

Magdalen could, if she chose, always conjure back a certain garden in Surrey. She could in her dream find herself under a softly murmuring beech tree; she could hear Percy's tones; she could feel again the touch of his hand and the electric current of strong feeling that passed between them when he had told her of his passionate love and that he must win her or die.

It is said that every woman has lived through this supreme moment, or might experience it if she chose. We doubt it, and certainly to only a few natures is it granted to give and to receive perfect and passionate love.

Magdalen had not given her love without a struggle, for love implies sacrifice; but once given the joy had seemed almost too great, too wonderful—she had not even had the strength to say "yes" to Percy Chester's flood of passionate rhetoric. She had leant against the beech bole and the beating of her heart had rendered her mute, but she had lifted her blue eyes, and their blue had been dimmed with tears, not from a "divine despair" but by a divine love. Life possesses nothing more beautiful, nothing more mysterious than this reciprocal love, and Percy Chester suddenly realised it. His flow of words

ceased; his strong, manly arms, taught gentleness by love, encircled her—this wondrous Magdalen! and in one pure passionate kiss their hearts had been joined.

This evening Magdalen saw the whole scene repeated; she seemed to feel the kiss again, to rest once more against the strong arm, to find breath at last to say, as she had done that day, "O Percy! is it true?" She seemed to hear his very tone as he answered, "Yes, Magdalen, till death!" Then her weary brain made a bound; it leapt over that year of happiness and alighted on another period, one which she represented to herself by the figure of a black curtain—slowly, very slowly let down from heaven till her whole sky was hidden and she was left in utter darkness, a darkness which had never dispersed, but which had ever since turned her day into night, causing her always to be groping on, seeking in vain for support.

"It did not kill me," she said to herself as she suddenly dropped the photograph and the letters upon the floor; "strange, or can it be possible that I am merely a ghost, a being without a soul, that it went away when he left England? There are strange things in life, is this one impossible?"

The clock struck one, and a colder breath stirred the soft folds of her dress. She had not even taken the trouble to take off her beautiful gown; she knew that before she could find rest she would have to think down the sharp pain. It was very, very rarely

that Magdalen allowed herself to begin thinking; but when she did so some irresistible avenger forced her to go on through the whole scene. She had to begin at the beginning, when she had first been introduced to Percy, and to go on and on—to pause under that beech tree, to feel the thrill of intense happiness, and then again to go on and on till the black curtain began to descend and to shut out inch by inch her sky of blue and all her happiness.

That first little edge of black had been so narrow, hardly noticeable. She even remembered that she had experienced pleasure when a certain married pair had settled in a house near to her country home. The wife was a pretty, fluffy, fair thing; a little angel in appearance, alway dressed to perfection, and outwardly joining the innocence of the new-born Eve with the beauty of a Helen. A little soft, affectionate creature, whose very baby face and baby hands spoke of everything except guile. But some evil star had shone, and the baby woman had cast her soft looks upon Percy. He had played with her at first, as one does with a kitten. What did it matter? She had a husband, and he was engaged: both were quite safe. Magdalen was sometimes a little too much in earnest, and showed too plainly her devotion to and her admiration for him. The fair, fluffy kitten said little amusing things—sharp, like drops of vinegar. She often even scolded the big Percy, taking up the amusing standpoint of a married woman. She laughed at

him for being such a devoted lover, and she unfortunately found out that Magdalen had not much sense of the ludicrous. This little thing had a passion for amusing herself, whilst her lord liked nothing better than fishing, and, as she said, you could not expect a woman to turn into an everlasting water-nymph to please any husband. She adored horses and hunting, so did Percy, whilst Magdalen was nervous on horseback, and—why enumerate any more? It is a common story, so common that every day our newspapers contain more or less detailed accounts of such narratives, and the beginning of those trials that end with a respondent and a co-respondent are as often as not begun in just such harmless ways. The heroines are often little soft, pretty, fluffy, delicate women who are bored, who want amusement, who are *blasé*, who find a dull husband hell upon earth, and somebody's handsome lover a glimpse of heaven. Really, after a time the details are not interesting. Zola or another may describe them graphically, but very soon they pall upon one; they are true but not amusing, for out of the hollow life rings a hollow laugh, and the death's head peeps out wickedly below the pink-and-white flesh. There is seldom one ennobling struggle to compensate the reader for examining the sickening details, there is seldom even one defeat as good as a victory.

A man is but a very weak instrument in the hands of a woman of that sort. Lily M'Intyre pitted against

Magdalen Cuthbert was as a strong silk cord compared with a gossamer thread. Percy found himself one day tied and bound with the silk cord; he struggled feebly, but it is not easy to struggle when a fluffy kitten is looking on and laughing softly; and Magdalen in her noble, generous unsuspectingness, woke up one day to find the first seed of jealousy in her mind, the first idea of suspicion eating into her very heart.

That is yet another story, another well-known struggle, another oft-told tale, and the end too is painfully unoriginal. The waking up and seeing *Finis* at the end of a page of one's life, when the life has apparently just begun. The sudden news, told with almost brutal sympathy, that one's lover has eloped with another man's wife, and that they have both left the country.

When Magdalen's meditation reached this point, even now she opened her blue eyes wide, as if she must look into the invisible, as if she must see farther, as if she *must* follow him and know more. Finding this impossible, she rose and began nervously to undo her dress; she wrapped herself up in a soft white dressing-gown and leant out of the window to imbibe another breath of cool night air. To the world the story was old and forgotten, to her it was new still, it might even have happened yesterday. She felt she *must* go after them; she must, at any cost, separate them; she must tell him that as he had left her she would die; that her heart was breaking;

that that woman could not make him happy; that she alone had the power and the right to do so.

"Percy, Percy, I alone!" She said these words aloud, now she was alone, and now that the words were but a foolish mockery. "Percy, Percy, do you hear me? you must, you must! O God! do the dead hear? I forgot. He is dead, dead—my Percy; the man I loved like that; and he, this Brice Leslie, knew him, loved him. He must have heard his story, but not with names. Oh no, Percy was generous even when he was wicked, he could not betray a woman's name. You could not do *that*—could you, Percy, though you did so much else? Is it *possible* that I can still feel the agony, still, after all these years?"

She walked to the pier glass and, lifting her beautiful arms, unfastened her hair. It fell in thick, waving masses around her (the Magdalen's hair was a subject of discussion among some of her acquaintances), and she gazed at herself as one gazes at a beautiful stranger.

"No, I am not *that* Magdalen; I have all her power of suffering, I have inherited all her sorrow; but I am not *that* woman; she had the capability of being good and generous; she was loving, forgiving —oh yes, intensely loving, and this one—" Magdalen laughed, a short, satirical laugh, a laugh that would have stirred pity in any heart that still remained human. "This one is very different, for now I know everything about women; I know all *she* did

to win Percy and ruin him; and if I chose . . . I, too, could win and ruin a man. Have I done it?—Not as she did, because I have never seen another Percy; but, pshaw, the game is not worth the trouble. Where is the man that would satisfy me? That woman must have had a moment of intense triumph; she must have laughed in her soft cooing manner, if only once, with real enjoyment—and afterwards? But perhaps that once must have made up for the rest. Who would risk all for nothing? No one, not even the devil."

The clock in the room struck two. A dull sound of a church clock followed, and Magdalen Cuthbert lay back on her cushioned chair, spent with the struggle that had taken place in her. She might have been the ancient mariner himself telling his tale to a stranger, urged on to do so by an inward impulse too strong to resist, but now that the tale was told she felt weak as a child.

Usually she stopped here, because she knew no more. When Percy Chester had disappeared, the world Magdalen lived in had paused a moment to lift its eyebrows, and to offer her a curious pity; then, after this slight surprise, the world remarked that the tale was old, forgot the episode, and went on as before.

And for Magdalen never a syllable of news. Had they lived and loved? had they drawn closer or had they parted? had the after enjoyment been worth the

awful tearing asunder of true love and of rightful duty? had they been all in all to each other, or had they hated each other?

But silence alone answered—nothing.

Time had gone on. Magdalen had changed, changed past recognition; she had given up old friends; she had dragged her father to London, and she had tried to drown thought in the world's restless stream. And all the time she had been starving, starving for the want of any word, any certainty of Percy's fate; but the word had never come.

She waited and waited. Some day she thought he would come back, broken-down, sad, crushed; he would come and lay his wretched life at her feet, and say that what remained of it was hers. This was Magdalen's last generous thought, last womanly vision. In it she had seen herself stooping to him, lifting him tenderly in her arms—she who was so tall and strong; she had heard herself murmuring words of forgiveness; she had heard herself saying once more, "O Percy! is it true?" She had believed that her pure lips would cleanse away his stains, and then that their broken lives would unite like a bough that has nearly been broken off, but which, because of tender binding up, has once more been joined to the parent stem.

But that awful silence had in the end destroyed the vision, and she had at last,—remember it was a long time before this happened,—she had said aloud—

"If he comes I will spurn him with my foot, and I know he *will* come."

By this time there was sad havoc made in Magdalen's fair garden. Her father died, and she was left alone with Mrs. Stewart, but she was left well off. Had Percy come now as a penniless prodigal, she would have had enough for both, but then that vision of exquisite tenderness had faded quite away. And next—the tale must be gone through, even if it is not by any means original—one morning Magdalen Cuthbert took up a newspaper, and read the bare announcement: "At ——, New Zealand, on the —— 18—, Percy Chester. Friends will please accept this the only intimation."

Strange human nature! Magdalen suddenly regretted her lost vision of pity. She might have kept it had she been more noble; it would have made no difference to facts. *He had never come back.*

And the rest? What was it? Had she, Lily M'Intyre, closed his eyes? Why had he died? Percy Chester had been so strong, so handsome, that the word death could never be associated with him. It seemed almost an impossibility to think of him in the cold grave.

Again silence said nothing.

Magdalen breathed a deep sigh. The story was over, it was her turn now to live. She must live, she must have some enjoyment before she died, she must revenge herself on life that had cheated her so miser-

ably. She, too, must have her one moment of triumph—her one soft, cooing laugh of happiness—paid for at any price; why not she as well as that other woman? Why not? Life was life, and death was inexorable. Life was slipping away so quickly, so very quickly, and she had had no happiness; she had only sipped the wine of love; she had never had a child's lips against her lips; she had never heard the sweet call of *mother*, as did so many common women with no heart—she who would have worshipped at a child's shrine if it had been his child, Percy's child. O God! if there were a God!

The clock struck three, a distant cock crowed,—a coachman's wife in some near mews kept fowls, and this chanticleer began early to wake the echoes.

Magdalen was intensely weary. She had now hardly sufficient power left to crawl into her bed. In spite of her weariness, however, her beauty was a sight worth seeing at this moment, for the weakness of strength has its own strange beauty. She looked like some heroine of the Sagas, or some ancient prophetess after the oracle has been delivered at the cost of the bodily anguish of the seer. Then suddenly a spring of long dried-up tears forced its way to the surface, and with one bitter heart-rending cry Magdalen threw herself on her bed as the words escaped her lips—

"But he, this man, saw him—knew him, knew all; and I must, I *must* know!"

CHAPTER V.

Gorse and heather and a thousand beautiful things; fir woods where the squirrels scamper and where the hedgehog coils himself up into a formidable ball, where the woodpecker disports himself and the wood-pigeon coos to her mate. Imagine a property composed of all such lovely things, and add to it distant views of exquisite colouring, for it is only in this part of the world that you get exactly these tints. Imagine, too, a canal whose banks are more beautiful than many a riverside, and place a little boat on it in which a girl is rowing herself slowly along in the dreamy fashion which a hot July day naturally calls forth. Now and then she hastily puts up her hand to brush away a gnat, or else she bends forward to notice the lovely dragon-fly that has settled for an instant on the arrow-head leaf. If you can visualise all this, you cannot but admire an exquisite picture.

"It is very, very delightful to be in Old England,' the girl was thinking; "in New Zealand we were always talking of *home*, and yet we little expected to come here, here to Foy Lodge. How papa used to picture it all to me, and how mother doubted; and

now, and now I am so very, very happy; and when he comes—"

She shipped her oars and, throwing herself back, flung her arms behind her head and let herself float downwards with the current. She made a very lovely picture, and an artist sitting on the bank saw her pass by, and to himself called her "divinely fair." Poor man! he had no settled income, but much romance in his character. He would have given her the last gold piece he possessed to have stopped by him in her present attitude, and just to let him sketch her as a sweet water-nymph, but even the possession of money does not give you the courage to beg young ladies dressed in becoming costumes and who are floating down a river to act as models.

Griselda Foy was not "divinely fair," because that is a fairness we cannot easily describe, whilst she, on the contrary, easily lent herself to definition. She was rather above the average height, but she had more the outlines of youthful girlhood than of fully developed womanhood. Neither was she extremely young, having just celebrated her twenty-first birthday in her new home. It is beautiful to be young and to possess nearly all that an innocent heart can desire. It is still more beautiful to have a strong power of enjoyment which crowns everything that surrounds your existence with a golden halo. Life was precious to Griselda because she was happy. She looked down on its long vista and hailed it with the gladdest wel-

come and with laughter. She was not *blasé*, she had plenty to do, and she was not delicate or fanciful. She was full of a healthy poetry, which to some natures makes even sad things enjoyable. She was ignorant of the details of evil, but she had intense pity for evil-doers and for the suffering of which she was cognisant. Now she had come home to England after her twenty-one years of colonial life, and she was ready to believe that everything in England was perfect. She dearly loved New Zealand, but Foy Lodge was the old home of her ancestors, so she loved it better than the colonial farm. Her two elder uncles had died within a few years of each other, and most unexpectedly her father had become head of the family and possessor of its Hampshire property, and this was the reason why these New Zealand settlers had returned to the mother country.

Griselda could have found her way about the Foy estate blindfolded, before ever she came to Foy Lodge. She knew all the nooks and corners of the house, of the garden, of the fields and woods; she knew all about the winding canal and all the lovely bushes and copsewood treasures on its banks; she knew the look of the American weed lazily waving its fronds below the surface of the water; she recognised the rustle of the moorhen, the song of the nightingale, and the chirp of the yellowhammer. Now she had them all in reality, and leaning back in her boat she said aloud—

"I believe I am still dreaming, but when Brice comes it will be real, real. I wonder if next year we shall go to London, and if Brice and I will . . . No, papa can't do without me yet, and mamma won't hear of any parting; but Horace and Evie will soon be grown up, and—well, nothing matters now that we are here and that Brice is coming."

There was no inordinate shyness about Griselda. In that she differed from an English girl of her own age, character, and standing. Hers was a beautiful nature, and by that we mean that all her impulses were good, for the passions of more passionate natures had never ruffled her inner sanctuary. To some she would have seemed as one of God's angels whilst to others but half a woman, and in consequence only half to be desired if wholly to be admired.

The lithe limbs were all grace; the small, active, well-rounded arms were the embodiment of energy; the fair hair in plaits around her small, well-shaped head looked like spun silk, and the grey eyes deep, tender, and gentle in expression. A modern writer has said: "The ideal world has its sorrows but it never admits despair." Griselda had lived and did live in an ideal world, and she not only shut out despair but she knew not even the meaning of the word.

Heine's words did, indeed, apply to Griselda Foy, and must have been written for her counterpart—

"Du bist wie eine Blume
So hold und schön und rein ;
Ich schau' dich an und Wehmuth
Schleicht mir ins Herz hinein.
Mir ist, als ob ich die Hände
Aufs Haupt dir legen sollt',
Betend, dass Gott dich erhalte
So rein und schön und hold."

Thus dreaming of future happiness, whilst hardly able to realise to the full her present joys, Griselda floated down the stream till all at once the boat, going its own sweet way, stranded itself near a bridge. A man leaning on the other side of the bridge heard the sound of the boat grating against the posts sunk near the bank to support it. He unfolded his arms and stepped across the road, then he looked down and the expression of his face suddenly changed. Griselda had not seen him, and he had time to think many things and to pull himself together before making his presence known ; then, drawing back from the parapet, he hurried down the grassy side of the bridge to reach the towing-path. By this time Griselda was standing up and was trying to push the boat off when she suddenly looked up, then she dropped her oar from sheer surprise and exclaimed, turning first pale, then bright pink—

"O Brice ! is it you ? Who—what—how came you here ? In England, and I didn't know it."

Brice laughed aloud ; he grasped Griselda's outstretched hand, and in an instant he was in the boat beside her.

"A real, real surprise. I couldn't resist it, really I couldn't. My people even don't know it, no one does; and strange, isn't it, that fate should bring us together like this!"

"Strange? no, not at all; but—I wish you had written. Tell me everything; when did you land? No, not to-day, nor yesterday?"

"Yes, very early yesterday morning, and I stayed in London that night."

They sat down still holding each other's hands. They did not kiss, because they were in a peculiar relationship to each other. To all intents and purposes they were engaged, but the fact was still a secret. In the happy New Zealand days, when Brice came sometimes unexpectedly to the farm, they had learnt to love each other. It had all come about very gradually. First, a brother and sister-like acquaintance, a young sister's feeling for an elder brother; then something more; then on Brice's side a feeling that this beautiful child was too good for him; then a wish to win her, and then— Well, then an outcry from Mr. and Mrs. Foy: Griselda was too young, in her lonely farm life she had seen so few people. Some day she must be sent to England, to Foy Lodge, where her uncle and cousin lived. Brice Leslie's people also lived near the Foys. He knew the place; they were friends of the family; everything about the engagement would be suitable, except that there was very little money on her side. Certainly Brice was not poor, he had a nice

income; but Griselda must wait a long time for her share of the farm profits. Mrs. Foy always lived in a state of fear. She feared Brice was a little old for Griselda; she feared he might not have enough money; she feared his health might break down; she feared Horace and Evie would miss their elder sister; she feared she herself could not do without her; she feared Griselda did not know her own mind—and she feared many more things in this same strain.

Mr. Foy took quite another line. The prospect was exactly what he wished and expected for his Griselda, but there was time enough. Brice Leslie was more than ten years older. Was he quite sure that she was the wife best suited to him? But *if* they stuck to each other, and *if* things went on happily, he had no objection to their becoming engaged.

Suddenly Mr. Horace Foy found himself the head of the house of Foy. His brother and his brother's only son were one day both drowned in a yacht, and he came in for Foy Lodge and a comfortable income. The New Zealand farm was sold, the family goods packed up, and the Foy family sailed away. Brice came to see them off, and said he should soon follow them. He would get a long holiday, and then—

"And then we shall be allowed to be engaged," Griselda had whispered; in the meantime she was very happy about the new prospects, and Brice was a little jealous. A year might change his Griselda; she might see someone she liked better; she might do all

sorts of things—and he wanted her. He yearned for home life, his own people not being particularly sympathetic, and he had parted from them early in life. For a year, however, he continued his lonely life, and then he obtained his leave and set forth for England and for Griselda.

Brice Leslie was one of those men who develop late. When young he had been so full of health and strength, of energy and talent for his profession, that he was satisfied with working out his superabundant life in this way. Then came a new experience, his friendship with Percy Chester—a friendship which taught him much that perhaps it would have been happier for him not to know; but there was no resisting the fascination, or perhaps the strength of animal magnetism, which has never yet been fully understood, and which Percy Chester possessed in a marvellous degree. It was not only women who were attracted to him, but men also who fell under the spell. It is a question for learned people to unravel whether great generals, great leaders, and great sinners of the world have not been the victims or the happy possessors of this magnetic power, the strength of it determining the amount of their success or the extent of their ruin.

For years Brice Leslie was this man's willing slave, and only when death came to separate them did the pell cease. Then only was it that, weary of life from its standpoint of hero-worship, Griselda's gentle influ-

ence and purity of thought cast its charm over him. He had known enough of stormy life, enough of the suffering of sin, enough of sorrow, though it had touched him in an indirect manner. The reaction made Griselda appear to him like an angel from heaven, and he loved her.

To say that he did not understand her is to state a trite fact. What man who has had no sister, no home life since he became a man, can understand a woman; what woman can understand a man? But he knew that the merry-hearted girl had no thought that need be hidden, and that her pure, unselfish life was only too good to be given to him. He had learnt so much through Percy Chester. For years he had admired a man whom his conscience condemned, and this state of mind was deteriorating, setting up a feeling of uncertainty as to cause and effect in the moral life, which put the whole machinery out of order. Viewed from the outside, however, Brice Leslie was a high-minded, noble specimen of humanity, a man whose strong physique betokened a strong power of moral resistance, an *ego* of no mean capability, and yet—Percy Chester had still much to answer for; the dead, through the power of thought, being still powerful for evil as well as for good.

"You must forgive me, Griselda, for not having told you," said Brice, smiling.

"I *was* surprised. Let us row back at once, Brice; this makes the day quite, quite perfect. Of course

you know all this country, but to me it was new and yet old. It is fortunate I learnt to row and ride so well in New Zealand. Your sister can't understand my love of out-of-door exercise, but she should have lived out there for a few years, then she would know! And fancy, Brice, I rather like society, in spite of the severe remarks you used to make about it."

Griselda looked so pretty as she said this and smiled at him, that he shook off a little of his mental languor, so that the old thoughts began to reassert themselves.

"Of course you do; I expect you are made much of."

"Yes, papa says so. The people were a little stiff at first, but they soon thawed. This year we are still in half mourning, but next spring—"

"You reckon easily without me."

"Brice, of course I don't, but I couldn't leave them at once, could I? And now you will have a year in England and be so much with us. Your house is not a long way from Foy Lodge. When you come it will be almost like one of your long New Zealand visits."

"Almost, not quite for *me*, I expect."

"We have not seen much of your people. Your father is a great invalid now, and Mrs. Leslie and your sister hardly ever leave him, but oh, Brice, they will be angry with me for seeing you first. They don't know—"

"No, of course not; you know I was allowed to mention it to no one."

"Yes, I know. They think we are only great friends," Griselda blushed so prettily that for a moment Brice wished that everything had been settled last year, and he wished also that he had now the right to kiss those sweet lips that smiled at him.

"Perhaps I ought not to be coming home with you, Griselda."

"Why not?"

"Oh, in England people are so straitlaced!"

Griselda laughed heartily.

"No, your sister says that customs are changing fast; besides, what does it matter? This winter I went hunting with papa a good deal, and just because I rode right through everything, as we did at home, people were surprised and only consoled themselves by calling me 'The New Zealander.'"

"As if you could do anything wrong, dear," he said gently.

"Why, you are as foolish as ever, Brice! I'm just the same, why should I change?"

"You are Miss Foy of Foy Lodge now."

"But I'm myself first; I hope I never shall become artificial."

There came a sudden turn of memory's wheel over Brice Leslie's mind. He saw a tall, handsome woman, leaning her beautiful arm against a marble Venus. That woman *was* artificial. The most unsophisticated

person would say so—and yet, and yet, how splendid she had looked. How she flashed out her remarks. And the end—what was it? what had it meant? How he longed to know even now, though he had put miles of country between her and himself. Here was another woman, one barely on the threshold of life hoping she might never be artificial. Had that other ever been as youthful in mind, and as innocent in her thoughts as Griselda? That was hardly possible!

"I can't imagine you anything but yourself. Griselda has the poetical vein improved since I last—"

"Since you last found my unfortunate scribbles! It was very unfair of you, Brice, and you do not deserve to know. I'll tell you one thing, however: I have studied a good deal of the real poets since I have had so many books at my disposal. You will like our library. It seems Uncle Stephen was a very literary man, and was always buying books. If I were clever—"

"You are quite clever enough for me," said Brice softly.

"Brice, you don't know! Girls are so clever here in England now. They go to college, and they take degrees and understand all kinds of things. Your sister, who likes parish work and poor people, says that learning spoils nice girls, but I have seen some delightful girls and women who have been to Girton and Newnham, and are very much like their neighbours."

"You can ride and fish and boat and make dresses and help everybody, and you are always ready with womanly sympathy—that is far better than—"

"What are you counting up my virtues for? No one but you would do anything so funny! Now, here we are. We have made this landing-place here close to the firwood, so that there is quite a nice little walk up to the house through it. You didn't know Foy Lodge well in old days, did you, Brice?"

"No, when I was young your uncle was rarely here. At one time it was let to some disagreeable people no one visited."

They pulled the boat into its resting-place, and then Griselda slipped her hand into Brice Leslie's arm just as they used to do in New Zealand when Brice had suddenly turned up after one of his long surveys.

He felt proud and happy at this moment, so happy indeed that he dreaded to see the end of the walk.

"By the way, my little girl" (he used to call her that), "was it not curious that yesterday morning I met a cousin of ours, a Lady Mary Milton, and she insisted on my coming to her reception in the evening. It seemed so strange to me to be in a fashionable concourse of people. I found out I am not made to shine in society. Everybody seemed to be so much alive, but in quite a different sense to the wideawakeness of our colonial friends. There was an aroma of scented existence, I can't express it in any other way."

"Is Lady Mary the wife of Mr. Milton, the great portrait painter? Your sister told me she was related to her."

"Yes, and he was there, of course. A simple, good sort of fellow."

"How delightful, Brice! I like artists and clever people, and I am sure I should enjoy all that London world I know so little of. I am glad they are *your* relations. And did you see pretty girls in plenty?"

"I suppose so; I am not a good judge, and failed to recognise the merit of one of Lady Mary's favourites."

"Stupid Brice! And you admired nobody?"

"Yes, one person, but—"

"But what?"

"She was a woman of forty, I should imagine."

"A woman of forty! How *very* old."

"She did not look 'very old,' I assure you; the younger beauties were nowhere beside her."

Griselda laughed, a clear happy laugh. "Then you *did* notice somebody, sir! and you pretended indifference. Look, there is the dear Lodge! don't you like that lovely old brick colour? It is an Elizabethan house, I believe. I have a turret chamber, and it is all a delight and a romance; but isn't it strange, mamma is now always regretting the New Zealand farm? She is a little bored by society, but I'm not; I like it all—everything, and papa is happy too. He shows me where he caught his first fish and where he shot his first crow. Look, the doors are all

open as in the old days; come in. It is only seven o'clock, and dinner is not till half-past. You will stay, of course, but I'm afraid everybody is still out this lovely evening."

"No, I must not stay. I have strayed already too far, but to find you on my path by that happy chance, was—"

"It was too delightful to be chance. Shall I own it, Brice?—I was thinking of you when I was floating down the canal. It was because of you that I grounded."

"Because of me! What an idea! am I to believe that, Miss Foy?"

"As you like, but it is true. Brice, one minute; come into our hall; I want to show you the motto carved deep over the oak mantelpiece. It is very old and the carving is deep and black with age. I wonder which of our ancestors had it put there."

The two entered the hall where there was a general look of old carving, quaint nooks and panels of various ages. A great open hearth seemed to welcome the guests, and an overhanging carved pyramidal mantelshelf displayed the ancient motto Griselda had mentioned.

"Look, Brice, there it is, you know it," and Brice Leslie read it aloud with a strange new feeling of never having understood it till this moment.

"*À Dieu Foy*
Aux amis Foyer."

"Those old folks believed in mysticism and quaint devices, were great at punning, and this one is charming. Good-night, dear Griselda, I will come back as soon as I can; I must go now."

"O Brice! mind you do come back as soon as ever you can."

CHAPTER VI.

BRICE LESLIE'S parents were of a type which calls for little description. Highly to be respected and unimaginative, they had not encouraged poetical development in their two children, and had not Brice left home early and learnt from the world of thought and the world of men the complex nature of all life, he might have become another Admiral Leslie without the worthy sailor's vocabulary. The old man was now a prisoner in the sickroom, a martyr to rheumatic gout, and other maladies. He never left his chamber, and his wife rarely left him. As for Brice's sister, it might almost be said that Miss Leslie had always been an old maid. She was quite content to look after her district, to walk for miles with no object in country lanes, to write the family letters, order the household, and, by way of special entertainment, to exchange stories of the delinquencies of servants with her neighbours. She did not read much, declaring she had no leisure for this pastime, as if reading were a sinful amusement and knowledge to be lightly esteemed. Brice had gone to the colonies when quite a young man. He had seldom had a holiday, and he

was now altogether out of his element at home. His sister tried hard to hide her intense dislike of muddy boots, but she experienced a decided feeling of irritation at having Brice about the house. Her feminine mind had become wedded to "high tea" at varying hours, to suit varying village classes, so that she considered dinner and bottled stout irksome innovations; therefore she was not at all sorry about her brother's constant visits to Foy Lodge.

Miss Leslie liked Griselda Foy. She said she was interesting and pretty, but she rode too much across country and had curious tastes. No doubt New Zealand must be a strange place, it was wonderful Miss Foy was as ladylike as she was. Of course Miss Leslie did not dream of love between the two. Brice was a man, and in her eyes Griselda was a child. Brice went to talk and walk with Mr. Foy; of course the two were old friends and enjoyed discussions about farming. She considered Mr. Foy wonderfully well educated, considering he had lived so much *out there*, though Mrs. Foy was decidedly colonial; she treated everybody alike, and had not learnt what was due to old families—such, for instance, as the Leslies, who were, if poor, quite as good as the Foys. This was Mary Leslie, an ordinary type of the ordinary woman.

Brice listened to a good deal of this sort of talk after his people had got over their first surprise at his sudden arrival. His father did not like to see him

for more than ten minutes at a time, and his mother was not to be spared from the invalid's room. What would Brice have done without the Foys? Everyone was satisfied. Once Mary Leslie remarked, "When the season is over, Lady Mary Milton will come to Rosehill, her new house. It is in Surrey, a ten-miles' drive from here, but it takes you more than an hour and a half by train. Railway companies do such foolish things. I hope, if you had surveyed for them, Brice, you would have been more sensible than to put stations at inconvenient distances. Anyhow, you must call on the Miltons, as you went to their party."

"Ten miles is a prohibitive distance for calling," said Brice.

"Not for you, of course it is for us; besides, I don't like artists and people of that sort. They are always so irreligious. Still you won't mind *that*—men never do."

Brice did not argue the point, he sauntered off to Foy Lodge.

Griselda at least was bright and cheerful. Mr. Foy was still radiant about his new possessions, and Mrs. Foy doubly fearful about everything, especially fearful of losing what they had just acquired. She said her husband was very extravagant, and Horace was at Winchester—such an expensive school—and Evie's governess was certainly not worth £100 a year, which seemed a great deal for simply teaching one girl.

It was only Griselda who fitted into her new position as if nature had especially intended her for it. The beauty of the place harmonised with her poetical character, besides she was so young and so hopeful, so trusting and yet so diffident of her own powers that there was nothing stereotyped about her actions. This diffidence of youth is a beautiful thing. It has a touch of humility, allied to a certain directness of aim which older people lose, because after a time they see so many reasons for and against almost every action. They learn to suspect human nature and its power of resistance, but at one-and-twenty we have little doubt of our own judgment, and none at all about our power of carrying our decisions into execution.

A week after her meeting with Brice Leslie, Griselda Foy stood on the steps of Foy Lodge, and as the horses came round from the stable her cheeks flushed with pleasure and a smile was on her lips. She and Brice were going for a ride, just such a long ride as they had been accustomed to have in New Zealand. They were going anywhere, everywhere that was permissible across country, through hedge gaps and over the wild heather. Brice rode well, and the two knew each other's ways so thoroughly, that as they rode they could talk for any length of time about the past and about the future. No wonder that this was to be a red-letter day for Griselda, and that Brice felt like a *preux chevalier* as he helped her into her saddle.

Mr. Foy was a tall, grave, kindly man—a gentle-

man in the best sense of the word, because all the crust of false customs had been broken through during his colonial life. He stood at this moment on the steps of Foy Lodge and looked at the two riders with undisguised pride. Brice Leslie was, he thought, such a clever, thoughtful man, a man who would some day win recognition from the world. He was not rich, as some count riches, but the two would be happy—that was the chief thing. Brice had cared about Griselda so long, and to-day the elder man had just given his consent for Brice to speak decidedly to Griselda; but he still wished the real engagement to be kept private, for Mr. Foy had old-fashioned ideas about mourning. It was too soon after his brother and nephew's sad death to be marrying his daughter; besides, Griselda ought to see the world a little—she was too young to settle down at once to married life. So Mr. Foy had begun the subject with Brice and told him that he and his wife had settled that the private engagement must still hold good, but that he might now really speak to Griselda about the future.

"Take her for a ride, my dear fellow, and settle it with her in your own way, you know. My little Griselda will never even look at another man as long as you are near—that is certain, I am sure, though on this matter her mother disagrees with me. Hers is a very warm, steadfast little heart."

Griselda did not know these words had been spoken, but she knew she was going to have a good

time with Brice, and to be with him was for her pure, unalloyed happiness. She loved him with all her heart and soul.

Strange to say, now that the prize was within his grasp, that the sweetest woman he had ever known might be his, Brice felt a certain reluctance to break the charm that had united them, a charm which at this moment seemed to him better than a formal engagement. Then the feeling suddenly changed as they galloped away in the morning sunshine. It was a pleasure to see Griselda seated on horseback. Her young figure, perfectly proportioned, had acquired a flexibility which only an out-of-door life, unfettered by tight waists or fashionable enormities, can give. Griselda could even outrun her brother Horace, and could ride all day without being tired. Brice gloried in her powers, and to be once again by her side, to note the glow on the soft rounded cheek, the kindling of the honest grey eyes, the sway of the figure in perfect rhythmic movement with the motions of the horse —this added to the enchantment which he now experienced. Sometimes they rode close side by side, sometimes finding strange gaps or narrow heath paths they were separated, sometimes even it was Griselda who took the lead and cleared a heather bank or a hurdle fence with the ease and experience of fearless horsemanship.

"Brice, this is perfect; let us go on and on into Surrey. I warned mamma not to expect us till quite

late. We will have a real New Zealand day. You know the village of Raywood; it is the sweetest of places, and we can put up the horses there and go and see a cousin of ours, Mrs. Hope, who is the wife of the clergyman. We have called on them and they on us several times."

Griselda was just in front of him and therefore did not notice the slight frown that knitted her lover s brows. Raywood was the village where the Miltons had a house, and he did not wish to go near Rosehill.

"Will it be too far for you?" he said.

"Too far! No, indeed. Oh, the joy of going on and on, and with you too, Brice—why, it's just perfection."

Perhaps the girl's love and admiration were a little too visible. Her devotion wanted the touch of uncertainty which has a charm for some natures. Brice forgot at this moment that her love had been growing for years, and that he had diligently cultivated it. What was it that had made him just out of touch with the old idyllic feeling which had till now so much fascinated him?

"It shall be just as you like, my little girl. I can't tell you how delightful it is to go over my boyish haunts with you." He said this and meant it, but there was not much passion in the words or in the feeling.

"You never guessed then that there was such a person as Griselda Foy, did you?"

"Never! Why, you were not born."

"When you were nine years old I was not; but after that— Isn't it strange that somewhere in the world a person may be living who holds your—well, almost your life in their hands?" Griselda's grey eyes clouded over; the beauty of the fir-woods, the scent of the heather treasures brought strange thoughts into her brain. Fate's chilly finger was touching her, perhaps for the first time, even though she did not know it or understand it.

"Those ideas make one giddy."

"No; they are delightful. I remember so many sweet things about you, Brice. I remember when you first made me care about poetry; I remember the first time you said life was not all joy. Till then I thought it was one sweet, long holiday, and really I sometimes doubt whether now even I understand that it is anything else, but I *ought* to do so."

"What a child you are still, Griselda!"

"No, no, I'm a woman now—I know there is sorrow, and I want to do all I can to make it less in the world; but I am so stupid, and I can do so little. I comfort myself with thinking all *you* have done. How kind you were to that poor Mr. Percy Chester when he was so ill."

"Kind! He was my friend, Griselda; you know I was intensely fond of him; I admired him immensely."

"Yes, I know, I wonder why? Do you know,

Brice, I always rather disliked him. Of course he was handsome, and all that, but—"

"He was not perfect, and you believe in perfection too much."

"Do I? Well, yes, I would rather believe it is possible to be perfect. In fact, I know it is. Now, Brice, for a gallop on this lovely moor. Isn't this glorious, and we are quite alone."

Life is a wonderful fact, a mysterious strange reality, a dream of possibilities, a contradiction in its very fleetingness; esteemed so lightly when young, clung to so persistently when old, and seldom made use of to its fullest capability. Griselda, at this moment and indeed always, saw it bathed in golden light, whilst Brice, having one of love's rare treasures at his feet, was doubtful whether it were altogether worth picking up. The perversity of humanity is often as wonderful as its powerlessness to cope with facts.

On and on they rode till at last the village of Raywood appeared in sight. It nestled at the foot of a wooded hill; a stream ran through it necessitating little bridges flung across the water to give access to some of the cottages. In the near distance the hops in the hop-gardens were displaying their lovely garlands, as if ashamed of the straight unpoetical poles which supported them.

"Now, Brice, look; do you see that house with the stream running through its lawn? That is Rosehill. It is small, but nearly perfect. It is your Lady Mary

Milton's house, I believe. Further on is the vicarage, where the Hopes, our cousins, live. Shall we lunch there, or make a picnic of it and imagine we are at the antipodes?"

At this moment they reached the entrance of a narrow lane, and quite unexpectedly a heavy cart issued out of it, just crossing their path. Griselda's horse was startled, and she, not dreaming of danger, was holding the reins loosely, so that she was not able to prevent a sudden wheeling motion of her horse against the cart. There followed a plunge, a desperate dash, and in another moment Griselda was thrown off her horse and lay on the road. Brice's horse had also shied, but happily there was just room for it to dash forward instead of against the cart, and when Brice pulled in his steed and turned its head it was to see his Griselda lying on the ground.

In a moment he had dismounted, flung the reins to the foolish carter, and bidden the boy if possible to catch the other horse. Then he was kneeling beside her.

"Griselda, my darling, are you hurt?" He raised her up, and saw she was very pale; her eyes were shut—was she dead? He lifted her in his arms and carried her to a cottage opposite. The door was open, only a stone-deaf old woman who could not move from her chair was within, but there was a couch in the corner and he laid her there, and hurried to fetch some water.

In a few moments Griselda opened her eyes and smiled to see Brice's anxious face above her.

"Oh Brice! it is nothing—did I fall? How silly of me! Hurt? Oh no, only I feel a little giddy."

"Lie still there, darling. Yes, it was that fool of a carter. Oh, it's all right,"—for Griselda looked questioningly towards the old woman.

"She is as deaf as a post and can't move. The family has gone shopping. Are you sure, quite sure, you are not hurt?"

"Quite sure. I can get up. May I?"

Brice was sitting beside her, pale and troubled. He had had a terrible fright; it seemed to him as if an angel had been by his side and had nearly taken flight, without his having the power to hold her back.

"My darling," he said, stooping down—no longer the quiet, grave Brice, but quite another person—"my darling, put your arms round my neck, so, never mind anything. Don't you know your father has at last given me the right to take care of you? It is no longer a possibility and all that humbug, at least between ourselves." He put his strong arms round her, and in so doing, for one moment, his lips touched hers. It was their first kiss, and given under such strange circumstances that the blood rushed back to her cheeks, and Griselda's life was instantly beautified, altered, raised out of the purity and ignorance of youth into the greater purity of conscious self-surrender. But even at this moment she was troubled by

the new awakening and was shyly standing up a little away from Brice arranging her hat when a shadow fell across the doorway and a voice said—a voice that sounded like a soft ripple of clear water—

"What is the matter, what has happened, can I be of any help?"

Brice turned round with some feeling of annoyance. He would have liked to be quite alone with Griselda now and always, or so he fancied, and then suddenly he was surprised into a smile, for Lady Mary Milton stood before him.

"Mr. Leslie! you here, and—"

"Miss Foy has met with an accident, but I hope it is nothing."

"Miss Foy of Foy Lodge!—ah, I knew your uncle, so I may say I am a friend of the family, besides being a cousin of Mr. Leslie; this surely gives me the right to give orders. How fortunate I am down here for the day, so I can say, Come to Rosehill at once. We were on the lawn and saw something had happened, but how strange it should be you? I have an impromptu luncheon ready, and if you like, Miss Foy, you can lie down at your ease. I think I can offer you something better than old Betty's hospitality."

Griselda was still feeling giddy, so that she had to lean on Brice's arm whilst they crossed the road and entered the private walk leading up to Rosehill. Her habit was torn and would have to be mended. So she was very grateful for Lady Mary's kind, womanly attention.

"Come in this back way, we shall meet no one. In fact there is only an old housekeeper here. I've come down just to settle about things. How fortunate! Now come up stairs with me, Miss Foy, and you shall lie down and have some wine. Mr. Leslie, you will find your way to the dining-room; I will soon come back. By the way, the disgraced horses were caught and I ordered them to be taken to our stables."

"Thank you," said Brice, from the bottom of his heart. "You are a true friend in need."

"You could not flatter me more. There's the *Times* on the writing-table, unfortunately it is the *Times* of one day last year, but you won't object to stale news, being a returned New Zealander. Each summer when we return this place is like the palace of the sleeping Beauty."

The two ladies disappeared, and Brice walked into the dining-room where a small table was laid for two persons. No one was in the room, and Brice wondered when Mr. Milton would turn up; then, feeling too anxious to sit down, he went and stood by the window and gazed out upon the lawn and upon the lovely view beyond. The mid-day sun added a semi-transparent haze to the prospect. The distant blue was soft and grey, and Nature seemed to be half asleep, only just enough awake to rejoice in its happiness. Brice was himself still feeling the pressure of Griselda's lips. She was still such a beautiful child, that it seemed almost wrong to awaken in her this

new passionate life—that is, if it were there to awaken. Some beings are perhaps born passionless, so Brice meditated; was Griselda one of them? But what did it matter—she was his, his in the beautiful future, his to work for and to love. Suddenly he looked down to find his hand resting on a little book in a paper cover, which some one had been reading and had laid open, face downward, upon the table. He ventured to take it up, and he found it was a book of old French poems. He read the one on the page. It was by *Fabre d'Eglantine*, one of the poets sacrificed by the Revolution. The verses began thus—

"Je t'aime tant, je t'aime tant
Je ne puis assez te le dire,
Je le répète pourtant
A chaque fois que je respire.
Absent, présent, de près, de loin,
Je t'aime est le mot que je trouve ;
Ou je le pense ou je le trouve."

He read on for three more verses; the very words seemed to have been written by a man who, like himself, had just won a precious love; and yet, strange to say, they did not strike an answering chord in his heart. "Perhaps they are too fanciful for an Englishman," he said to himself—

"Ton cœur m'est tout, mon bien, ma loi ;
Je plaire est toute mon envie ;
Enfin, en toi, par toi, pour toi,
Je respire et tiens à la vie.
Ma bien-aimée, O mon trésor !
Qu'ajouterais-je à ce langage ?
Dieu ! que je t'aime ! Eh bien ! encore
Je voudrais t'aimer davantage."

There was a step outside, and, as if he were guilty of some evil deed, Brice replaced the book in the position he had found it. Lady Mary must not see him reading a love-song, or she might guess the truth about Griselda. The door opened, and he turned round hastily.

"How is she?——" He paused, a strange cold shiver passed through him, for in the doorway, dressed in some soft black lace material, which enhanced her beauty, a large plumed hat that softened the slight sternness of the features, and one exquisite rose in her bosom, stood Magdalen Cuthbert! She too paused and said nothing; but her face flushed, her lips were firmly pressed together, as if to force them to suppress a sudden exclamation as she walked grandly towards him, saying quite calmly and quite indifferently—

"How do you do, Mr. Leslie? I did not expect to see you here to-day."

CHAPTER VII.

MAGDALEN CUTHBERT had come down with Lady Mary to Rosehill for the day. It was true she had promised to stay with her in July, but she was already repenting of her promise, and trying to excuse herself, being extremely changeable about her plans. Since that meeting with Brice Leslie she had lived in a dream. Any great excitement plunged her into one of her strangest moods, therefore she longed for quiet —the intense quiet of the country; but yet, when she got it, it merely seemed to paralyse her, and she felt forced to plunge once more into the whirlpool of society in order to live, or rather to feel alive. She knew nothing of Lady Mary's invitation to Brice Leslie to meet her, so at this moment she was entirely taken by surprise, and her astonishment was not in the least feigned. She had seen the accident from the lawn, but as Lady Mary and the gardener had hurried out to offer help, she had settled that she was not wanted. Her energy was not often concentrated on persons in trouble. Illness repelled her and caused her positive discomfort, just as some people are affected by the presence of a cat in the room or a spider on the wall.

She had since heard from the maid that the lady, whose horse had shied, was shaken but not seriously hurt, and that Lady Mary sent her word to go downstairs and begin luncheon, and she would join her presently. Accordingly, she had come down, and then, suddenly, she found herself in the presence of the man who had caused all the renewal of her pain. She remembered every word spoken at their last interview, for it had been burnt into her brain. She remembered the intense indignation her flippancy had called up on his calm, handsome, kindly face. Brice Leslie's face, she thought, was not of an ordinary type; on the contrary, it was full of character. He was a man of few words, who could not bandy compliments with the easy carelessness of half the men she met; a man who had been able to rouse her, and to punish her as no other man had been able to do since Percy had forsaken her. It was only through his knowledge of Percy that he had done so, but the experience was new to her. It impressed the man on her mind; she could never forget him as she forgot so many of the masculine gender who paid her attentions and over whom she often exercised an unfortunate influence. Now he stood before her, and they were alone. The chance she had stooped to ask for was hers, though she was far too proud ever to have asked again for it, even if she must die without finding out what she so intensely longed to know.

It was true that Mr. Leslie stood before her—but

of what use was that? What could she say to him, and how beg for news of Percy? All this flashed through her mind, but she was not going to be a second time taken by surprise. She decided that she would make him forget her previous request, and then when he was off his guard she would draw it out of him. The idea of conquest for the mere sake of amusement brought back her full self-possession. Once more she was the sparkling, handsome Miss Cuthbert, a woman with every talent and more than her full share of beauty; a woman who, being no longer young, knew the force of every word she used and the effect of every pose she affected. After her indifferent greeting to Brice, she added—

"I never imagined that you were connected with the accident, Mr. Leslie. You were riding with a lady; I hope she is not much hurt?"

Magdalen held out her hand with a graciousness of word and action which Brice was quite unprepared for. There was no scorn, no banter in her tone, only intense sympathy and charming politeness. Brice was charmed, but he was on his guard.

"I was riding with Miss Foy, whose father is a neighbour of ours, and who is also a New Zealand friend, and so I need hardly add that she is a perfect horsewoman; but accidents will happen even to the best riders."

"But she is not hurt?"

"Not seriously; I was frightened for a moment, but it is nothing."

"I am very glad, but in the meanwhile you must be hungry, so let us eat." She rang the bell, and in a few moments she was acting hostess with the perfect grace of a woman accustomed to entertain. On his side Brice made a great exertion to appear perfectly natural and perfectly self-possessed. In reality he felt neither, but he could have given no exact reason why he should feel embarrassed. It was more the recollection that she had attracted him powerfully that first evening of his return to England than any present feeling which made him feel shy, for, at this moment, Miss Cuthbert was too natural to be dangerous. He found himself wondering why he had thought her so artificial. There was very evident softness about her now, almost a childlike confidence that was bewitching in a woman so evidently of the world and so extremely well dressed. Contrast has always a certain charm, and to find a great lady attired in the height of fashion, and yet as simple as a mere nobody, gratifies shy people who feel their own shortcomings in the ways of the world.

Brice was grateful, grateful for the new picture of herself she was giving him, and grateful too that she was not going to punish him for his last rude behaviour and ill-mannered speech. They began, of course, to talk of the beauty of Rosehill, of the neighbourhood, of the prospect of the hops; and they had just reached

the hop dog and its use and beauty when Lady Mary herself hurried in.

"I am very glad you have renewed your acquaintance," she said, with her brightest smile, immediately remembering her wager. Here was the very opportunity she had been looking for. Magdalen had taken some notice of the New Zealander, and the New Zealander had naturally been struck by her beauty. Doubtless he was younger than Miss Cuthbert, but what did that matter? Any man might be glad to win her, though whether he could manage her after the knot had been tied was another question and purely his affair. The real difficulty lay with Magdalen herself. She had flirted up to a certain point with many men, but just when they believed themselves safe to win they found her bearing towards them suddenly altered. Then she drew back; sometimes she laughed, sometimes she seemed utterly bored, and sometimes even she forgot them.

"She has never really loved since that affair," Lady Mary said to herself, feeling she knew exactly where the fault lay, so that now her mission was to remedy the evil. "Let these two be together for a fortnight, and my wager is won. Magdalen will lose her restless discontent and—well, she would not be so afraid of the venture if she only guessed how happy my married life is, and how Frank lets me do just as I like in everything. That is the kind of husband she wants. I wonder now whether Magdalen would lead

him a life; she—well, that's not in my bargain"; and with these thoughts now dancing through her fertile brain the little lady sat down ready to carry out her plan. She loved planning and contriving marriages as much as she loved giving famous parties, and she had unfortunately made one or two successful hits. In these cases success is a dangerous reward and tempts one to begin again, for living chess pieces are far more amusing than dumb wood.

It was thus Lady Mary who was the guilty one; but how was she to know that that child upstairs, with her simplicity and her gold-brown hair had been Brice Leslie's love for years, and that on this very day their lips had sealed a long-understood contract? In all fairness to her it must be said she knew nothing of this, and strangely enough the idea never passed through her head. Brice's self-possession still more hid the facts of the case, and evidently his evil star had already risen, though it was only just visible above the horizon.

"How strange!" exclaimed Lady Mary, "how very strange we should meet again here by accident, and by means of an accident, but my patient upstairs is doing very well. She has had some champagne, and is now lying down. I believe she will sleep it off. Do you know, Mr. Leslie, that your bringing Miss Foy here will necessitate my calling on her father and mother. What sort of people are these bush folk? I suppose the girl has been to school in England?"

Brice ought to have spoken out now. He ought to have said that he was that day a fortunate and accepted lover, but he was too quiet and shy to enter into particulars; he let the opportunity slip; besides, he was bound to silence by Mr. Foy himself.

"No, you see before you a real, educated New Zealand young lady. Miss Foy is in England this year for the first time."

"The Foys come from a good old stock, but I hear Mrs. Foy does not care about society. You know we do not see much of our neighbours, Magdalen, so vegetating here may bore you."

"No, I love the country; it reminds me of former days," and Magdalen gazed dreamily out of the window.

"Does she mean it?" thought Brice, casting a furtive glance at her. "Strange woman! one does not know when she is, or is not, in earnest. Of course now she is pretending, for how can *she* like a country life? Indeed, she told me she did not like quiet when I last saw her. I wish Griselda were well enough to ride home at once."

"My dear, you are getting poetical. If you had a Frank always with you, you would soon leave poetry to English bards, born, I suppose, for that purpose, for they are often stupid in other subjects. When I have finished my lunch I will take you to the summer-house, and you shall both admire the view at your leisure. My New Zealand cousin has, as the ancients

used to say, the poet's dreamy eye and sad cast of countenance. I daresay, in secret, he too writes verses to—" Lady Mary was going to say "to his mistresses' eyebrows," but stopped herself in time.

"I love poetry too much to write it," said Magdalen, rising and going towards the window; and then she became conscious of the French book turned on its face upon the table, and slowly closed it. For all the world she would not have been found reading it.

"That remark, Magdalen, is not altogether worldly-wise," said Lady Mary, laughing, and her laugh was so bright and good-humoured it seemed to make sunshine in the room. "For my part, I have noticed that it is the very unpoetical people who '*adore*' poetry; they feel the lack of it in their own natures, and so supply their need out of books."

"Surely not," said Brice, "you can have no real sympathy with poetry unless there is an answering chord in your own mind."

"At all events, it is a dumb string till another hand strikes it," said Magdalen, turning round, "but the whole credit must belong solely to neither."

Brice looked up utterly surprised. Magdalen had placed herself with her back to the light; a soft shade was over her face, whilst her waving hair peeped out from beneath her large plumed hat. She looked like a picture painted by Velasquez, grander and more highly coloured than a Sir Joshua. There was so much real feeling, such an apparent depth in her re-

mark, that it seemed impossible she was merely the society Miss Cuthbert whom he had met, admired, and scorned.

"If the hand makes discord, the string is blamed for it," said Brice, carrying on the idea.

"Avoid metaphors," said Lady Mary. "I assure you it is brain labour lost. A woman in her own person, that is, in her words and actions, outwits all philosophy."

"And all philosophers," added Magdalen, stepping out of the French window upon the lawn, and followed by the other two. "Tell me, Mr. Leslie, does New Zealand or England claim your greatest affection?"

"England—home," said Brice quickly. "Even though patriotism, as I am told, is a worn-out creed."

"Like Christianity, some say," put in Magdalen lightly.

"But I only know that as one steps on board the ship that is to take one home one's throat tightens, however little one may have thought of it previously."

"But if your wife and family remained behind, the feeling—supposing you cared about your wife, a sentiment slightly behind the times—would materially lessen; therefore it is not *true* patriotism, it is the love of oneself and of one's own concerns," said Magdalen.

"Then you do not believe in noble feelings," answered Brice shortly. She was beginning to irritate him again.

"I? Oh yes!—when I find them."

"Now, Mr. Leslie," put in Lady Mary, "look at the view; from here you can see the castle to perfection. The Duke of Blackwater's place is always a nice point for artists; look there, on the side furthest away towards your home. This small hill with a summer house was Frank's pet scheme. He took more pains with it than he does with a rich sitter."

"Has Mr. Milton taken Miss Cuthbert's picture?" said Brice, seeing Magdalen in a new light as, with one hand shading her eyes, she gazed as if spellbound towards the beautiful distance.

"No, she will not condescend to sit to him. Between ourselves, it is, I believe, from fear of not being flattered enough."

Magdalen's spirit appeared to return from the distant view, and, dropping her hand, she smiled. So intensely sad was the smile, however, that Brice relented, for surely that look, at all events, spoke of some true thoughts.

"Why should I have my picture painted?" she said. "Mrs. Stewart is not given to art, and never recognises even a photograph. Who else would enjoy the work of art?"

"But you must have many friends," said Brice, falling under the influence of that sadness which was doubly effective after the laughing, scornful manner of the previous moment.

"I live in the world, you know, and I believe I be-

long to that 'society.' Did you ever look for a friend *there?*" she said bitterly. Lady Mary did not hear the remark; she had gone to gather a rose, and then called out to the pair that she was going in but would soon return to them.

Magdalen Cuthbert sat down on a low seat inside the summer-house. She folded her hands on her lap, and looking up suddenly into Brice Leslie's face she repeated the question.

"Have you ever found a friend in society? By the way, that friend you mentioned, Mr. Chester—you called him your friend, did you not?"

Brice also sat down, and, ignoring the question, he said abruptly—

"You wanted to know that story?"

Magdalen did not look up. Her clasped hands trembled a little, and there was a visible paleness in her cheeks, but Brice was not looking at her.

"Yes," she said quietly.

"Percy Chester was the man who, in some mysterious way, more than any man I have known, most influenced my life. He attracted me so powerfully, that in spite of everything I knew—and there were few things he did not tell me—I would have gone through fire and water for him."

Magdalen laughed her short, strange laugh.

"You are then capable of that kind of attachment?"

"Oh, I did not measure and weigh it out as people

in the world seem to do; I simply—why, need I be ashamed of it, I simply loved him and worshipped him."

"And he was worthy of your love?"

"I don't know. I tell you I am not the man to measure out so much for so much. He was brave and fearless, and yet, in some ways, a coward; strong at times and then intensely weak; clever, oh yes, he could do all he chose; and yet he would have periods of depression and—"

"Was he happy? I mean was he happily married?" Magdalen spoke distinctly as if her words were carefully selected. Brice forgot his prudence.

"Miss Cuthbert, you know something of him, or you would not ask me; you know, I am sure you know, that his life was wrecked by a woman."

"No," said Magdalen firmly, "I did not know it; tell me."

"I cannot tell you the real details; I believe in friendship after death, so that even now I could not break confidence with him. I believe Chester repented as deeply as he had sinned. The woman who went by the name of Mrs. Chester—"

"Was somebody else's wife," Magdalen laughed.

"Was the curse that Percy Chester would not rid himself of. She became his hourly torture, and yet—"

"Yet he would not return to more legitimate ties

in England. He had friends who waited for him—for years."

Magdalen rose suddenly and leant against one of the supports of the summer-house, her eyes sparkled, her mouth was firmly set, and Brice Leslie then understood all the story, or thought he did.

"If I could tell you all, all, you would pity him."

"No, I should not; I should pity those who suffered more than he did."

"That is impossible."

Again Magdalen laughed her low, bitter laugh; it made Brice shiver mentally.

"You cannot know—you could not know him as I did," he said quietly.

"If he suffered, why is he to be pitied? Tell me one more thing: did she—was she with him when he died, or did she leave him?"

"She leave him!" Brice Leslie's face expressed unutterable scorn. "That would have been showing mercy to him, and she had none—no, she was his curse to the last."

"You forget, perhaps she loved him—she left everything for him."

Brice bit his lip. There were things he would not talk about, and Miss Cuthbert appeared cold and cruel. She had then once known Percy Chester and loved him, perhaps, but that was no reason for laying bare to her his friend's mental sufferings.

"Forgive me, Miss Cuthbert, if—if I cannot dis-

cuss this subject. Whatever you may have known about Chester, if you once believed in him, the knowledge of his suffering would only pain you."

Magdalen turned away her head.

"It does not pain me," she said, in a very low voice.

Brice had risen and was standing opposite to her; he could see the profile of her face and neck, and it reminded him of a beautiful snake. He felt so indignant with her that, in his impatience, he broke off a dead fir branch and snapped it sharply in two.

"I thought a woman could always pity—I mean a true woman."

Magdalen turned towards him again. She looked at him with all the intensity of a strong nature; her eyes were no longer hard or cold, but full of a sorrow that had no words, full, too, of unshed tears.

"You, Mr. Leslie, you know nothing, *nothing* about a woman. You cannot even understand a woman's love—its strong, intense force, its intense patience and its intense impatience. It was because I loved Percy Chester, as perhaps few other women have loved, that I cannot forgive him, and yet it is because *you* loved him that I tell you this, that you have seen me as I am to-day and as I was that other time we met. If you knew me you would understand what that means, you would know why still loving him I can also hate him.—No, you cannot understand; let us never mention the subject again."

"You loved him," said Brice, suddenly realising

what this woman's love meant. "How could Chester have been insensible to it?"

"We were engaged for a time, and then—" Magdalen passed her hand over her brow; "that was long ago—I was—another woman then."

"Too innocent to cope with *that* woman."

Brice moved a step towards her; he longed to say something else but dared not.

"Yes, that is true—I was another creature then! Ah, well, time changes everything, and I am changed!"

"You were generous then, you are so now. Will you let me tell you one more thing?"

Magdalen waved her hand; she realised all at once that it must appear to this man that she was asking for pity. She could not bear that thought.

"No, no, nothing more. Never mention it again. The past is dead, so is Percy Chester. We all change. If it were possible, and he could appear now, here—"

"You would forgive him?"

"No, I should never forgive her, or him. One does not forgive the wild beast that maims one for life— There is Lady Mary coming out of the house Mr. Leslie, promise me one thing; I ask it because you loved him." She stretched out her hand and laid it in his. He felt as if some one was commanding his obedience, as if the love he had given to his friend were being once more required of him.

"I will."

"Never mention this to anyone, neither to me nor to others."

"Not till you give me leave, though I should like to tell you—"

"No, no; tell me nothing more. Never recur to the subject again; but, will you be my friend, because you were his?"

"I will," said Brice, in a low voice. It seemed such a strange, wonderful thing to him to hear this woman, whom he had by turns scorned and admired, asking for his friendship. At this moment he would have gone to a cannon's mouth for her sake, and with no other hope of reward than her kind thoughts after his death.

There were steps heard on the gravel-path, and the two separated silently as one does after a funeral. Then round the winding garden-path leading to the summer-house Lady Mary appeared, and with her leaning on her arm was Griselda Foy.

Brice hurried forward.

"Are you sure, Griselda, you are wise to come out so soon?"

Griselda smiled up at her lover.

"Yes, Lady Mary has been so kind. After tea, which we are to stay for, I am sure I can ride home."

"We are all to have it here in the summer-house. Frank will be jealous when he hears of our little picnic. Magdalen, let me introduce the fallen heroine to you. Miss Foy, our New Zealand horsewoman."

Griselda held out her hand and smiled. It was a child's smile—it might have been an angel's smile, so pure and innocent did the girl look; and suddenly she, too, fell under the spell; for Magdalen's face was soft now, her eyes, so beautiful at all times, had in them, at this moment, an expression of womanly tenderness which gave her the one grace she usually lacked, and, as she smiled at the young girl, whose beauty was so utterly different from her own and whose countenance expressed no passion of disappointed life, she appeared to Griselda as the embodiment of all that was perfect.

"Brice," she said, as they slowly rode home in the cool of the lovely summer's evening, "I think Miss Cuthbert the most beautiful woman I have ever seen. I can imagine a man, in the old days of chivalry, being ready to die for her. Can't you?"

"Yes," Brice answered.

"I hope I shall see her again. She is coming soon to stay with Lady Mary. I wonder how old she is?"

"Oh," said Brice, trying to speak carelessly, "about forty, I expect."

Griselda laughed softly.

"Then, I think, that must be the perfect age."

CHAPTER VIII.

Lady Mary Milton and her husband were, as we have already seen, privileged people. They could do what others might not dream of doing, and one of the convenient privileges which they had claimed was the right to refuse all society when they came to Rosehill. If it was extremely difficult to get a second-hand invitation to one of their London parties, in the country it was quite impossible for unbidden neighbors to get a glimpse of the famous portrait painter and his fashionable wife. If people called, the Miltons were "not at home," and the cards were returned by a groom in a dog-cart. Of course it was extremely rude and unsociable, but what was to be done? Where would the rest have been for the tired couple if they had not made this stand? Not that they were themselves dull. They asked select friends to stay with them, and Lady Mary organised delightful expeditions, but outsiders were strictly excluded.

Rosehill was no more open to Lord Curtis than to Mr. Jephtha Jones, the Welsh curate of the parish. Thus the Miltons, being in this way truly biblical and having no respect of persons, avoided giving offence.

The world round Rosehill had at last recognised that a man's house must be his own castle when he chooses, and the Miltons were very happy in being not one of the first to lay down this principle, but one of the first to act up to it in their country seclusion.

Thus it happened that Griselda, quite unwittingly, had penetrated into the one house which was shut against everybody else, and when she heard that Brice, her Brice now, was going to visit there, she was enchanted.

"Perhaps the Miltons will let me come too some day, Brice. I should like to see Miss Cuthbert again. I have fallen in love with her at first sight, only I think her face is very sad."

"You would not say so if you saw her in society."

"Have you seen her there, Brice?"

"Yes, that night I was at Lady Mary's. I told you they are great friends, I think, at least as much friends as—" Brice paused; Miss Cuthbert had offered him her friendship—he was not going to find fault with it at this early stage of its existence.

"As what?" Griselda put her hand on her lover's arm. "Do you mean as we are?"

Even now, though the lover's kiss had been given, the old easy familiarity, which had been all happiness, was not quite gone. Brice carried the hand to his lips.

"No, darling, that would be impossible. Do you

know what a fright you gave me to-day? I thought for a moment—"

"Silly Brice! but I shall not easily forget our engagement day, only I feel as if we had really been engaged a long, long time—don't you? Will father really let me go back to New Zealand with you?"

"You will be sorry to leave this lovely place and your Foy Lodge, and all the fun and gaiety."

"Sorry to go with you? Why! I have been looking forward to your coming back every day since we left home, and now, oh! everything is changed, but everything is beautiful, and life is so happy."

"You are one of the happiest souls on earth; do you know that, Griselda?"

Griselda laughed, and in her laugh there was nothing jarring, nothing sad.

"I should think I *am* happy. I have everything to make me so."

"It is not many persons who can say that, Miss Cuthbert, for instance."

"No, she does not look at all happy. Do you know, Brice, if I knew her I should love her. I should like her to be happy. One can make people happy by loving them, don't you think?"

"You can, Griselda, dear," said Brice quickly, the strong attractive power he had felt when in Miss Cuthbert's presence was slowly passing off. It was as if he had been slightly magnetised, or as if his mind

had been clouded by strong narcotics, so that after imbibing their fumes his ride home with Griselda acted upon him like the purest and freshest of fresh air.

"Oh, I would try. I would never let her think of sad things, and she could not help smiling if—but perhaps I shall never see her again."

So talking they rode home slowly through the heather and the shady country lanes. The nightingales were singing, the humble-bees were settling themselves upon the scabious blossoms, and the squirrels were racing merrily up the red fir-stems. This evening there was a humming sound of love and joy over all the beautiful country. Such a night it was whereon lovers' vows are made, and believed in. If Brice was still dreamily thinking of Magdalen standing against the summer-house in all her mature beauty, her fierce anger, her intense feeling, and her sudden tenderness, he nevertheless realised that the girl he had long loved, and to whom he had this day pledged his troth, was a far more exquisite product of Nature's work. No artificial element was here visible, no forced ideas of life, no bitterness. Perhaps he had wooed and won too easily; perhaps, because of his close friendship with Percy Chester, he hardly recognised the beauty of perfect purity; or was it that, after all, there is something too unreal in happiness for fallen humanity to accept, something too much out of harmony with the grey tints of ordinary life?

They rode up the drive of Foy Lodge only just in time for dinner, and when Brice (Griselda having made him promise to make light of her accident) went to Mr. Foy's study, he mentally wondered why he had been in such a hurry to alter the perfect understanding that had previously existed between himself and Griselda.

Mr. and Mrs. Foy were both in the study reading some letters just arrived by the evening post.

"So you have come back at last," said Mr. Foy; "if we had not known you so well, Leslie, we should have been anxious."

"I *was* afraid, John, that something had happened," said Mrs. Foy sadly.

"Griselda fell off her horse. It was nothing serious, but Lady Mary Milton made us come to Rosehill and insisted on Griselda's resting there."

"Ah! I thought something *had* happened, but as she rode home it can't be much. So the Miltons took you in. I heard they never visited their neighbours. Artistic London people seem to give themselves such airs now."

Brice cleared his voice, stammered a little, then said—

"As you gave me leave, sir, I told Griselda that with your consent—"

"John's consent, not mine, Mr. Leslie. I'm afraid Griselda is too young; she has seen so few people; she does not know her own mind."

"But, my dear, you told me yourself that you were afraid Griselda would never think of anyone but our bushman," said Mr. Foy, smiling.

"Well, I was afraid of it, but one can't tell. However, now you have really formally engaged yourselves, I'm afraid it's no use saying anything more about it; but when things—I mean engagements—go on a long time they are not at all likely to last."

Mr. Foy laughed.

"Slightly Irish, my dear Jane. You know yourself that Leslie spoke to us about this before leaving New Zealand, and that Griselda has never even had another liking.—You won her girl's heart, Brice, and the love has grown with her like an indelible notch on the bark of a young tree."

"I'm afraid Griselda won't be asked out much if her engagement is known, and then the poor girl will have no pleasures," moaned her over-anxious mother.

"I want Griselda to be as happy as possible," said Brice quickly. "I have a year's leave, and that is surely long enough for preparations. If you will let me take her back when I go, I shall do my best to return here after a few years' absence."

"Your father and mother will think you might do better, Leslie. Griselda cannot have her fortune for some time to come, the estate is burdened with legacies, and I shall not be a rich man for a good many years, if ever, now that land is so much depreciated in value."

"My father will only be too happy to think I should possess such a perfect wife. You know, sir, that my sister and I will share our father's fortune after his death; with that and what I earn I shall feel Griselda can never want."

"I'm afraid the young always think they know better than other people," sighed Mrs. Foy; "of course Griselda is pretty, she might have married anyone. Lord Curtis admires her very much; I'm sure of it."

"Young lords admire all pretty girls," said Mr. Foy decidedly, for he possessed a large fund of common sense. "I wish my child to be happy in her own way, and long ago we found out nothing but good of Brice Leslie." The elderly man put his hand on Leslie's shoulder.

"I'm not blaming you, I'm sure, Brice, but one cannot help being fearful about the happiness of one's dear child. Marriage is a great lottery, and Griselda is so youthful, she believes in love at first sight," sighed poor Mrs. Foy.

"Come, come, Jane, it's all settled, and Brice and Griselda perfectly understand each other. You'll stay for dinner, Leslie, and have a lover's stroll afterwards? I know you'll make my child happy; and, my dear fellow, I hope you'll always find us ready to trust you with her welfare."

"I'm sure we do trust you, Brice, but you need not proclaim the engagement yet, in spite of John's

notions. Girls are so little cared for in society when people know they are engaged. Anyhow, we had better not tell the children."

So, much as usual, Griselda came down in her simple white muslin dress and black ribbons. The dress looked lovely, because she wore it, but otherwise it was quite regardless of extreme fashion. The dinner was also a simple meal. The butler who waited was an old retainer, and Mr. Foy wished to alter nothing that belonged to the past. The oak, dark with age, was ornament enough in the dining-room; the old-fashioned windows, looking out on green lawns and cedar trees, needed no modern upholstery and no dainty but unmeaning ribbon-bows to make them entrancing.

Griselda was the life of the party this evening. She had nearly recovered from her fall, and she wished no one to make a fuss about her. After the meal was over she strolled out with Brice, and with her arm in his she talked on to him about her life since the two had been parted. Then she wondered how soon she should begin making preparations for going back with him, whether she really could be spared, how happy the old free life would be, and so on; Brice listening to her remarks with a contented smile upon his face.

"So my little girl will not mind going back to primitive life."

"Mind! O Brice, of course not, but I must make

haste and learn many things here, so that I may be really useful to you and really your companion."

"Sweetheart! you are perfect as you are."

"Oh no, no! I mean to know everything. You are so clever, Brice, and so fond of books, whilst my education was not very first-rate, was it? I am sure Miss Cuthbert is very musical and knows everything. —Brice, stop here a minute; look at me well and tell me, do you think you will ever get tired of me? I am not half good enough for you, only you have not yet found it out."

He stooped down and kissed her on the forehead, and put one arm gently round her. Oh! if she might remain always as happy, as believing, as ignorant of evil as she now was, always—always! The sun sank in the far west, the evening sky began to be streaked with crimson, the interstices being filled up by a pale blue green that betokened rain, though the beauty of the day would certainly last till night's curtain had been drawn.

"My little girl, what a question!" he said. "A man might look a long time and very far and wide before he found another Griselda!"

Griselda laughed; for though she was not vain, she believed Brice's compliment as coming out of his true, noble heart. Part of Griselda's charm was a complete ignorance of her own perfections; with her all was so entirely natural that there was no room for art. She knew that she was not learned, that

she infinitely preferred a free active life to deep studies.

"I am glad you think so, Brice dear—oh, so very glad! Papa is good to let us be really engaged, even if we mustn't talk about it. Do you know I prefer keeping it to ourselves—don't you? and I mean you to go about and enjoy yourself. I sha'n't be tiresome. Do you remember Rose Jessop? When she was engaged she would never let that poor Jim Groves talk to other girls or go anywhere, or do anything. How we used to laugh at her! Jim Groves got so tired of it and became quite melancholy. I sha'n't ever be like that, Brice, I promise you."

"You would be a man's best safeguard, darling; but I don't suppose I shall be much away from you, whether you like it or not. I must go and see a few relations, and—well, I half think I shall give up Lady Mary's invitation, I should be so near to you and yet so far!"

"Oh no, Brice, you must go. She is a relation, and you would see Miss Cuthbert again, and perhaps I could ride over to my cousin's house and meet you —by mistake of course! I want to see Miss Cuthbert again. I think I could sketch her. I have not told you yet, Brice, that my rough sketches are much admired—imagine that! and yet I have never had a lesson. Mr. Best, the artist, said that I ought to go in for an art training. I laughed at the idea! No, I mean now to read a little history and study Shake-

speare and do all the things you like best, and not be known only as good at riding and boating."

Thus Griselda laughed and chatted on out of the fullness of her loving heart, little guessing that she should have given Brice more trouble in wooing and winning her. But such a thought wanted deep knowledge of the human heart, and she knew nothing of psychology or of the crooked ways of society. Out of the depth of her love she gave out love.

Brice Leslie was not a grand hero. The contrast between the sadness and sin which he had known in connection with Percy Chester had struck him forcibly when he had met and loved the child Griselda. He had thought that in her he had found the embodiment of womanly purity, a soul clear as a mirror and reflecting only the blue sky. Coming from his often long and lonely expeditions back to the small settlement at Waital he knew he should find there a sweet maiden with a smile of welcome and sympathy. He knew he should hear her laughing banter, and that she would be always ready to go out with him for a canter on the heath, or for a row across the bay in the glory of a New Zealand afternoon. Griselda had the perfect health and perfect spirits of one of earth's favoured mortals. Moreover, she was gifted with a sweet temper, which contrasted pleasingly with her mother's fretful fearfulness and anxiousness of disposition. Thus Griselda always showed to great advantage, for her life had few drawbacks, and her love had

grown quietly to full maturity; but there had been no room for passion, no time for doubts or depression, all had been full sunshine.

"Look, Brice, let me row you down the canal to-night; it will remind us of Waital, and then we can sing the Maori boat-song we liked so much. Do you remember it?"

So they sauntered down through the wood, over which now spread the evening shadows. With the activity of youth Griselda was soon ensconced in the boat, whilst Brice smiled his inward satisfaction as she dipped her oars into the water.

"You will be tired, darling, you ought not to do it," he said, lazily enough, however.

"Do I seem like it? Brice, look at the water-lilies they are like dear little gold pieces on the water. I think England is as perfect as it can be; I am a real English girl at the bottom, though I sha'n't be sorry to go back to New Zealand."

Brice would have liked Griselda to be more dependent upon him, more yielding on this first evening, but then she was not afraid of anything, so how could she wish for protection? She was simply happy, intensely happy. Till Brice had come to England she had wanted him to complete her happiness; now he was here her only wish was satisfied. Every hour was bright, was happy, and to-day—well, to-day was only the crown of all the past joy; even the future could not be much happier, for though the future was to

give her Brice entirely for her own, yet it would also take away her parents, and her brother and sister, whom she loved in an almost motherly fashion having done so much for them when they were tiny children.

As the boat glided forward among the reeds and the water-lilies, Griselda's voice, sweet and clear, sounded over the water, and lost itself in the over-hanging copse woods on the banks, whilst Brice's tenor joined in the wild native boat-song she sang so prettily.

Unfortunately it was not very far that she had to row him, and all too soon Griselda pulled up at the first bridge.

"Darling, I do not like to leave you to go back alone," said Brice, this time acting in a more lover-like manner.

"But you must, your people will be expecting you, and all the way home I shall think of you. It seems to me that all the rushes seem to say 'Brice' now, and the birds too. I shall get quite sentimental and you won't know me."

Brice smiled as he kissed her, but said nothing in words, and then presently he watched her row away as if he were looking at an inhabitant of another world, a beautiful spirit who knew nothing about sin and suffering, and who could live only when surrounded with joy. The feeling lasted all the evening and helped him to talk over his future plans with his father, and to receive his mother's congratulations.

His request that nothing should be said about it appeared quite reasonable to them, but his sister remarked: "It is just as well to keep it to oneself. Griselda is so young, she will perhaps throw you over. Young girls get so soon spoilt in society. I doubt if she will wish to return with you when you go back to New Zealand."

"I don't," said Brice shortly.

CHAPTER IX.

SUDDENLY Lady Mary was seized with the desire of enjoying what she called "A Rural Love Scene." She had the special talent belonging to a dramatic author, but as Nature had not provided her with enough patience for the severe labour of dramatic authorship, this natural talent had to find some outlet. Her play, at all events, was not complicated, and it had originated during an amusing discussion on Miss Cuthbert's refusals of eligible lovers. Then Lady Mary had accepted a wager! This last year, for instance, she knew for a certainty that Magdalen had had three proposals: one from a millionaire banker, whose antecedents were Jewish and whose cast of features was decidedly Gentile; another from an elderly colonel, who was of good family but by no means rich; and the third from a young man of property. Magdalen Cuthbert had been unmerciful in all cases. She never discouraged attentions, and she accepted homage with queenly indifference. She dealt out her cynical remarks with impartiality and nullified their bitterness by a good many exquisite smiles. Now and then she even bewitched her enemies; but, as for her

heart, the world began to doubt whether she had one. It was now commonly given out that Magdalen was not to be won by mortal man.

As we have said, Lady Mary took up the glove and declared that before the year was out she should attend Miss Cuthbert's wedding, and give the breakfast at Ross Square. Frank looked grave, and pooh-poohed the fun. He cared not a straw whether Miss Cuthbert were single or married, but he had serious objections to interfering with matrimonial affairs. His own suited him admirably, but then he knew there was not another Lady Mary in London town; besides, he had wooed and won without the help of anyone—why should not other men do the same? However, his wife would not be thwarted in her plans, the spirit of opposition being just then in the ascendent.

"Come, Frank, the *mise en scène* shall be perfect, and after all I am only working for Magdalen's happiness. That affair was so long ago, and she does not care a scrap about it now—I'm sure of it; only she has reached the age of indecision and wants a hand to help her to take the first step over that shallow brook."

"People usually know their own minds best, don't they?" said Frank, "without any help from admiring friends." His tone was just a little scornful. The Magdalen had no attractions for him.

"If you weren't so terribly prejudiced, Frank, you too would admire the personality of such a woman."

"But I don't. She is heartless. That poor old colonel believed in her, and she took to sympathising with him. I never believed a word of it the whole time."

"Well, yes; but you didn't expect her to marry a man who talks of nothing but campaigns, did you? Magdalen is clever and musical; a man like that would bore her to death in a week."

"A woman like that would send the worthy colonel to his grave in a fortnight; she would flirt, and—"

"Now, Frank, excuse me; you are very clever and an artist, and you think you study faces and character, but you know nothing whatever of Magdalen Cuthbert."

"I know quite enough; but anyhow, she is welcome to Rosehill, if she will give me a few sittings. The picture will do for one of my next academy portraits, and that will please her vastly."

This conversation took place before the exodus to Rosehill, and now Lady Mary had fallen still more in love with her "Rural Love Scene," because the lover's cue had come, and she having called Brice Leslie on the scene, he had appeared. He would do admirably, she settled, for he had that peculiar undefinable charm about him which attracts women. He was not vain, though he was handsome; he was in earnest, though there was nothing puritanical about him; above all, Magdalen admired him—at least she showed strong inclination to do so, and though it was rash to place

too much confidence on this mark of her esteem, Lady Mary was not to be baffled. Magdalen Cuthbert should have every help to falling in love which Lady Mary's beautiful Rosehill could provide. If Magdalen *would* have married without love, the task would have been quite easy, and long ago accomplished. But, never mind, thought the little lady, the play would become more amusing if it were really a love scene, and to see the cynical Miss Cuthbert succumb was worth some trouble.

This was how Lady Mary's play came about.

The weather was delicious, the harvest had begun; the sheaves were dotting the distant landscape with gold; ripe oats hung in waving modesty ready to be gathered; the flowers of the hop gave diversity to the beautiful vine-like leaves; the larks soared high above, occasionally darting to earth in order to take new flights, and all around was harmony and beauty. There are some days when love appears merely a complement to life, when the very air one breathes seems to kiss the lips it touches, when Nature holds out her arms and expects humanity to nestle on her breast so that she may listen to her honeyed words. To add to all this natural beauty, Rosehill exhibited the perfect union of nature and art. The green lawns were soft and enchanting to the tread; there were no sad laurels shutting out the sweet scent of distant fields; and for privacy there were uncultivated heather lands, where those who preferred solitude might wander on

over undulating hill and dales, or, if weary, find rest and shelter in the picturesque summer-house designed by Frank Milton.

Magdalen loved country sights and sounds, because of her inborn poetical nature. Also, she loved them because they soothed the tumult of gnawing regret, of lost hope, of lost love; but her love was of that strange kind which is sometimes much akin to hatred. The first few days she was at Rosehill the power of Nature's mysterious spell took possession of her, and she often wandered up to the summer-house, and sat there, sometimes for an hour or two at a time, without moving, almost without breathing. Her beautiful, blue, dark-fringed and saddened eyes gazed at the bluer distance as if there were some affinity between her and that palpitating azure haze, as if the blending of the distance into an exquisite whole was the remedy that would bring her healing and joy, as if she believed in the annihilation of all material life, and as if her spirit could take flight and leave the clay that had fretted it so long, to find at last rest in a perfect Pantheism. One day, after a long period of silence, she leant back against the rough fir-stems of the rustic summer-house, and, clasping her hands over her head, she experienced for a few moments, as she breathed a deep sigh, something of that often eluding peace stealing over her. It was as balm to the broken spirit, or as oil to scorching flesh. The peace of nature expressed in such pure colours had effected this moment-

ary stillness. Some voice had uttered the "Peace, be still" to her heart, and had given her a foretaste of the happiness of death, if death means perfect silence. Then one of her exquisite smiles broke over her face, a smile which had once brought Percy Chester to her feet, and which since then had made men both love her and curse her, a smile which must have been heaven-born, but which had passed forty years on earth and had become much blemished during its earthly existence.

She was thinking of Brice Leslie, not as a man and an admirer, or in any way as touching herself and her life, but as the one being she now knew who had seen Percy, who had known him, loved him, and who had brought her word that his life had not been all sunshine, that what had been a fatal momentary passion had brought with it death to his earthly happiness, and blight upon his life's rare blossoms. Once, long ago, Magdalen would have been able to endure any personal suffering in order to save the man she loved from an hour's pain, but not now. At this moment, her smile was caused by the certainty that he had suffered and regretted his folly, that she had not been alone in the fierce strife, but that he, too, had been fighting in the battle, had felt the bullet wounds, even if he and she had been separated on the battle-field. She now knew that he, too, had been where the battle was as fierce, if not fiercer than where she had stood. She had waited many years for this consolation, she

had hungered for it, and now it had come to her; and as she sat there, pondering over it, letting it sink into her very being, assimilating it with her love for that beautiful nature before her, she experienced the moment of peace that brought a look of joy to her face. It was fictitious joy, but it successfully simulated happiness, and for a brief interval Magdalen Cuthbert looked radiant.

She rose slowly, feeling that she must do something to express this new-born sensation, for it seemed to desire action in order to make sure of its identity and to revel in its new birth. Could it be true that the burden had fallen from her, that these few days of communing with Nature and the certainty of—shall we call it by the vulgar name of revenge?—had lifted the brooding weight from her spirit, and had enabled her once more to walk proudly in her own path, proud because free? All these years Percy Chester had kept her in bondage, but now—now—

There were sounds of footsteps, and Magdalen immediately remembered this was the day on which Brice Leslie was expected to arrive—doubtless he was coming up the path with Lady Mary. This latter had been very busy since the arrival at Rosehill, setting her household gods in picturesque order. The fashion of decorative art had changed since the previous year. Lady Mary had found in her house bows where no bows should be; last year they had looked artistic, this season they appeared vulgar. Frank had freaks, too,

about his studio, and his wife knew that no real peace was to be had till he was pacified into a rural state of contentment. Lady Mary objected to any household machinery being visible. Everything in a house, she said, ought to go on as if worked by unseen agencies; but, of course, even the best-contrived machinery has to be oiled and set going, and the motive-power generated. Lady Mary required a few days to put everything in motion, after that all went admirably. There was no moaning about servants' delinquencies heard at Rosehill; the young men and maidens knew what they had to do, and did it. This management of human beings is a talent like any other talent, and Lady Mary added it to her many other qualities. She knew Magdalen would be quite happy left alone for a few days, and thus the two, as yet, had done little more than meet at meals and in the evening.

These three or four days had recruited Lady Mary's energies; she positively longed for new excitement—of a rural kind, of course. There must be no clashing with the London life; that was of necessity a thing apart, the true business of her life.

Brice Leslie was her first and most important visitor. He had a part to play, and Lady Mary meant him to play it well. She knew of no reasonable obstacle, and, as to Magdalen, these few lonely days must have given her new zest for conquest. This time, thought Lady Mary, everything was suitable;

Miss Cuthbert had already shown her preference, and she must go further.

"What about failure?" murmured Suspicion. Lady Mary hated failure, and she meant to lay her plans with great caution and then to echo Lady Macbeth's words, "And we'll not fail."

But as often happens in life and on the race-course, there was a false start. Early this morning Magdalen might have been prepared to receive Mr. Leslie graciously, but now it was otherwise. Her spirits had risen. She felt she could rule, she could command; she felt ashamed that Brice had witnessed her moment of weakness; that he alone, of all the men who had admried her, had seen Magdalen Cuthbert overcome by the strength of a suffering she had so long been proud to hide. Even though it was in no way his fault that this had occurred, she wished to make him suffer for it. The strange part of this affair was that these two, without guessing it, were working in the dark. Both of them wishing to reach a certain point, acted in a manner conducive to bring about the opposite results. Brice had come to Rosehill, he hardly knew why, except that he wished to keep his promise and to please Lady Mary, and (this last object he scarcely whispered to himself) to study once more that peculiar mind confined within the fascinating exterior called Miss Cuthbert. But on his arrival he found that the goddess had altered her mood, so that it seemed impossible to believe in his past experience. Miss Cuthbert

was light-hearted, brilliant, scornful, imperious, expecting admiration, displeased when she got it, yet more displeased when she did *not* get it.

"The disease of being in love with such a mortal," thought Brice, "suppose a man were attacked by it, which I am not, could easily be cured by the same draught that caused it. Poison will cure poison. A day with Miss Cuthbert in this mood would repel the most love-lorn idiot." Then Griselda's sweet personality rose before his mind's eye and reigned supreme. "If I stayed here a year," continued the short-sighted Brice, "I might offer incense, but never sacrifice my peace of mind to her."

On her side Magdalen found her grand coldness received calmly. Brice neither courted her nor shunned her, and what is more baffling than perfectly natural indifference which is too indifferent to show indifference? She had the intention of making this Brice Leslie forget her past weakness, and not to presume on intimacy with her, because once she had been unable to hide what for years had been an unrevealed secret; but she found him apparently incapable of remembering it, or utterly indifferent to the remembrance. She saw her weakness treated as if it belonged to her by right of her womanhood. For the first time in her life she had not created the effect she had calculated upon. She was able to command love, to create jealousy, to laugh at devotion, but for the first time she encountered indifference, and for the first

time Magdalen was piqued. Something had crossed her path which did not gaze up at her face, so the impulse was created to stoop down and force an attitude towards herself which had not come naturally.

Had she not felt the influence of her new freedom it is doubtful whether she would have taken the trouble, but this strange relief from pain which caused her to laugh silently—a sad laugh all the same—left room for a new effort. Before, she had easily conquered, and, without a moment's pain to herself, had as easily rejected her prize; now the idea entered her head that she would follow the path a little farther. If she found it uninteresting, there was always a possibility of retracing her steps. If the flowers by the way proved—as many had done before—not worth picking, she need not stoop to cull them, or if she picked them, she could always throw them away.

That it was possible she should ever advance too far into the wood to return, that she should ever pick flowers whose fragrance would be too sweet to make her wish to part from them, never entered her mind. When we lay down an old burden, fitful fate sometimes lays a heavier one on our shoulders, and it was for want of appreciating this fact that Magdalen Cuthbert suddenly plunged into the wood, and with a smile upon her lips took the first step on the narrow winding path which led—whither?

All this is metaphor, but let it pass. The reality was the obvious sauntering about together during

that first afternoon; the airy nothings that were said; the monosyllabic answers of Brice, who was in no mood for exertion; the little sarcastic worldly remarks of Magdalen; the silvery laugh of Lady Mary, who smiled at Magdalen's contrary mood without being altogether disheartened, though indeed it warned her that she must be more circumspect, because her victory was not yet assured. Frank strolled in later, when the shadows were lengthening, and suggested a field walk.

A field walk taken by four persons, who think it a social duty to talk, is not a treat exactly suited to poetical natures. Magdalen walked on with Frank, and Brice was very attentive to Lady Mary. He parted the overhanging branches in the lane for her, placed stepping-stones over the brook for fear her dainty feet should get wet, whilst thoughtless Frank Milton allowed Miss Cuthbert to splash through the water like a rustic. Frank had no affinities with the beauty; she was certainly not the woman who would or could ever make him forget Mary. Magdalen knew this, of course. She had a certain scornful respect for his character, but naturally she did not trouble herself to waste smiles upon him. She listened patiently to his artistic remarks, doubting some of them, but bearing with them without contradiction for Lady Mary's sake. Certainly Magdalen liked her hostess as much as she could like one of her own sex —truly, faithfully, but phlegmatically, so that it was

all in Lady Mary's favour that she herself gave more than she received—plus a little amusement—in carrying out her generous plans.

Now and then Magdalen heard snatches of the conversation behind her. Once she almost turned round to join in it, but desisted, till at last Frank Milton caught sight of a binding-machine, and insisted on making his companion come across the field to explain its working to her. Miss Cuthbert scornfully remarked to herself that the artist must think himself an unrecognised Nasmyth.

Lady Mary understood nothing but human machines, and stayed at the edge of the field talking to Brice. All this looked simple enough, and yet it was just at this moment that Brice Leslie missed an opportunity. A hundred other men might have done the same, but the fact remains to be chronicled that this one failed in a simple duty.

"Indeed, Mr. Leslie, it really is very good-natured of you to have come to our silent and solitary Rosehill. I did not expect you to keep your promise." Lady Mary told white fibs extremely prettily.

"I should have done so anyhow," said Brice quickly, "but just now I am really glad to get away from home. My father is a little worried by my presence. Naturally, he wants to talk to me, and yet any excitement is bad for him."

"Some men would prefer more exciting amusements than a quiet country life, but, really, I will take

pity on you and see what we can do to show you what it is like at its best—English country life, I mean. I suppose those New Zealand Foys, your neighbours, are still clothed in a colonial garb, mentally—I mean?"

Brice smiled.

"Certainly at present we are all in the same boat, except that Mr. Foy is anxious to become a real English country gentleman, but personally I have no ambition that way."

"And what is your ambition?"

"Simple enough: to go back to my work till I have made a sufficient income, and then either to settle in New Zealand, or to return home to vegetate."

Lady Mary laughed happily.

"Your ambition sadly requires rousing. No, give up New Zealand, marry an Englishwoman, and turn your attention to politics."

"I don't believe in politics; besides, my wife may have simpler tastes."

"But there is yet time to choose the right wife. You want a woman of power, of—"

"But the truth is—" Brice was going to say, "she is chosen," then he stopped suddenly, for Griselda's parents did not wish for the publicity of the engagement, and he himself felt shy of mentioning her name. The very thought of that light-hearted, innocent girl seemed out of place just here, and Miss Cuthbert, when she knew it, might send one of the poisonous little arrows from her quiver at simple-minded Gri-

selda. Brice hesitated, paused, and was silent—his chance was gone.

"But the truth is," repeated Lady Mary, laughing, as she picked a graceful spike of oats and placed it in her brooch, "that you have become somewhat of a confirmed bachelor."

"I hope you do not mean by that I fail in respect to the fair sex?" answered Brice, trying to answer banter with banter.

"The fair sex forgive that if you succumb at last."

"Then I hope I shall be forgiven" (Griselda would certainly forgive).

"You shall be guided rightly under this roof.—Frank, wait a moment and give me a good character. Bear witness—do I often fail?" Frank and Miss Cuthbert paused. As the latter turned round, the brightness of the evening light formed a halo round her head, and the reflected glow softened the deeper shadows of her features. There was much about her of the splendid majesty of a Greek goddess, a goddess with the addition of the warm human life-blood coursing through her veins.

"If you do, you carefully hide it from me," said the artist, and the genial smile that spread over his countenance bore witness to Lady Mary's undying charm over her husband.

"Let me be another witness," said Magdalen. "Your failure is success compared to the success of others."

"Then I'll not fail. Listen, Frank! Let us extemporise a pastoral, a masque, an out-of-door play, call it anything you like; design the dresses, and I'll get the company. Every member shall be appreciated and appreciative, and this Australian cousin of mine shall see something of a country party—as it should be given."

"Don't ask any country-people, that is all," said Frank. "I know what that will mean in the near future—a gross of invitations."

"Invitations to garden parties," said Magdalen, turning towards Brice, who had been unsuccessfully trying to look away from the beautiful picture before him. "You see how Mr. Milton receives the idea. He does not pretend to like them as we women pretend."

"Good Lord! How can one pretend! People open their gardens—sometimes a mere patch of lawn. They stand at the door and hurriedly shake hands with you, and then you tramp round the green cage like frightened wild beasts; you cannot talk to one person, and are soon sick of saying the same thing to many. Next, you try to slink out unperceived, and are sure to fail, for the hostess says in an aggrieved tone, 'Are you going so soon, Mr. Milton?' That is called pleasure! Mary, you must sue for a separation, if I am to begin a series of garden parties."

Lady Mary laughed and reassured her spouse.

"Your hatred to such entertainments does not ap-

proach mine, so you need not fear. Not a soul from the neighbourhood shall come, unless—yes, what do you say, Magdalen, to making an exception in favour of the fair New Zealander; but how are we to avoid papa and mamma, brother and sister?"

"Ask her to stay the night," said Magdalen; "she is young enough to enjoy that sort of thing."

Brice stood by silent, but repenting of his silence.

"She would look beautiful as an Undine, but that is a detail. I see everything before me. The shade of the beech trees, the players playing their mimic parts. Magdalen, you can be the central figure. What a success! the murmur of the crowd, the—— Let's come in and hunt for a play. Actors must learn their parts in a week, rehearse at the beginning of the next, grand performance on the following Thursday evening. There will be lamps suspended from the trees, and Arcadia will be rediscovered."

Lady Mary beheld the whole thing before her mind's eye, and for her it was a new conquest.

"Mr. Leslie will see how we make fools of ourselves in the country," said Magdalen, for the first time that day looking straight at him.

"Then I shall think it is folly to be wise," answered Brice, and Lady Mary said "Bravo!"

CHAPTER X.

THAT evening after dinner Brice Leslie felt himself in another atmosphere, an atmosphere he had never lived in before, and which was like choice wine to one who has never tasted fermented liquor. He metaphorically took a sip and put it down slowly, uncertain whether he liked the taste of it or not. He had lived among two species of humanity; the one represented by his friend Percy Chester, where life was a terrible reality—a struggle against hateful, even if self-bound chains; the other, besides his own humdrum circle, was the peaceful, almost pastoral, simplicity of the family at Foy Farm and the entirely innocent-minded Griselda. But at Rosehill neither of these two elements were visible. There was no scandal and no defiance of society, but on the other hand there was matured beauty, high breeding, sparkling and cultured wit. Brice's own nature had revolted against the Lily M'Intyre type, but he had loved Percy Chester so truly that he had learnt silently to endure the sight of "that woman." It was, however, the reaction from this state of endurance that had made him admire and love Griselda Foy.

Neither of these experiences had prepared him for the strange intoxicating influence of this fresh centre. It was all the more powerful because, on the surface of it, there was no danger-signal visible. Magdalen had not given him one bewitching smile, and Lady Mary had not revealed to him one jot or tittle of her plans. There was merely the perfect freedom of speech, the appropriation of him as an accepted relation, from whom sympathy was expected; and, further, there was the delightful unconventionality of an English home life unconnected with monetary anxiety, this being quite a new feature to the settler's mind. Lady Mary knew—and few people do know—how to be rich. She oiled her machinery generously and expected it to work easily, and her expectations were not disappointed. We may live some time in a relaxing atmosphere without feeling any injurious effects, and this evening Brice, for the first time, gave himself up to the enjoyment of the moment. His future was calmly beautiful; he had no danger to foresee in that quarter. The present was represented by a woman who was fascinating even if no longer young, and by an original lady of fashion who was of the world without being worldly, and whose tact, sweetness, and politeness never failed, so that she jarred against none of the old-fashioned ideas of what became a true lady. It was like sailing on a calm summer sea. There was blue above and blue below, and Brice knew he was no mean sailor. He was aware that

storms might be close at hand, though there was no visible sign of their approach, but he could not hide from himself that that evening some of his indifference to Miss Cuthbert suddenly wore off.

The raised terrace was a charming spot for coffee-drinking and smoking. The fashionable portrait painter was a connoisseur in cigars, and was generous to his visitors. Lady Mary, dressed in blue and swan's-down, sat discussing plays and possibilities, whilst Miss Cuthbert joined in with clever remarks and suggestions, or suddenly relapsed into a silence which was as eloquent as her speech. When her face was at rest Brice noted that unmistakable look of yearning sadness which had attracted him in London. It almost seemed as if this expression had been once suddenly impressed there, and that the features must perforce now and again fall unbidden into the same lines. Brice found himself pitying instead of blaming her. He seemed to hear her once more declare how much she had loved the man who had proved faithless, and the words in which she had offered him friendship still echoed in his ears. Since then she had certainly met him as a mere acquaintance, but the recollection of that other conversation made him suddenly get up and stand silently by her chair. Sometimes Opportunity seems to delight in acts of kindness, —or shall we say in laying pitfalls for the unwary?— for at this moment Frank Milton walked away to the other end of the terrace, and Lady Mary said she had

just recollected where to find another book which might contain a suitable play. Brice never doubted the idea was spontaneous, and certainly never fancied Lady Mary had any ulterior motive; but then he was a man, and she a woman with a purpose.

The half light, the soft delicious evening air, the heavy perfume of a second hay crop wafted towards them, the stillness of wearied humanity surrounding them,—and all these made pity grow apace. A man's pity is wondrously tender; it has none of the curiosity which desires to probe a wound, which curiosity is often part and parcel of a woman's sympathy. Magdalen had loved, and had suffered, he thought. If she would have listened and heard all, all that Brice could tell her, she would forgive; but she had forbidden him to speak again on the subject, and he dared not disobey. Since then he had fancied her proud, worldly, heartless; but at this moment pity—shall we call it man's divine pity?—conquered.

"I hope Lady Mary will not charter the boy-musician again," he said, sitting down near to Magdalen, so that he could see her outline against a background of chrysolite sky. "Do you remember how much you pitied him that evening in Ross Square, Miss Cuthbert?"

"Did I? Most likely it was wasted pity. The minds of professional people, even of children, are filled with one object, the object of making money and

getting fame, and that passion satisfies every earthly desire. I ought to have envied him."

"Envied him? God forbid. I have seen enough of the curse of money-getting."

"Curses and blessings are purely terms to express not a reality but an imaginary state of mind, and I am not superstitious."

"Superstition may differ, I hope, from some few truths one has clung to from childhood."

Magdalen did not laugh scornfully, as Brice, directly he had spoken, half expected her to do. Her voice was perfectly natural, neither eager nor sad, as she answered in quite an indifferent tone—

"I have no truths to cling to."

Brice was silent. He could not have answered this remark, having no appropriate words at his command; it was Magdalen who next spoke again:

"It is better to have your brain filled with one thing —good or bad according to your natural disposition— than to remain a blank interval. Forgive a musical idea—I know your taste does not lie that way. Sometimes a discord may lead up to a perfectly harmonious phrase; good and evil are so truly mixed, that it is impossible to judge and to discriminate between them. When I hear men and women trying to do so, I think of something more profitable."

"No, no," said Brice, roused at last. "Excuse me, your argument is not difficult to refute. There are broad lines which are easily distinguished."

Magdalen laughed softly and without glee.

"You have missed the wave of 'heredity,' which has washed our shore lately and swept away a good deal of refuse. There has been a heap of nonsense uttered, still much of it has been unanswerable. To judge everything you must know everything, but it is best to accept all limitation. However, I am sure, Mr. Leslie, that we shall never agree; why discuss these subjects? A woman is really quite unequal to argument; she loses and breaks her thread, and makes but bungling work at joining it again."

Brice was a little piqued, and this woman's pride urged him on against his better judgment.

"To live without sympathy is to lose a great deal of pleasure."

"Sympathy is easily obtained. I think, on the contrary, that much of the sympathy offered by outsiders is pure impertinence. I learnt early to live without it, in fact to dislike it."

At this moment Lady Mary came back, and was greeted by this remark from the beautiful Magdalen:

"You ought not to leave us alone, Lady Mary. Mr. Leslie and I have been disagreeing; pray, if we are both to take a part in your play, make us hereditary foes."

"Bravo!" thought Lady Mary. "If Magdalen takes the trouble to quarrel, it shows she is interested. Courage, I see daylight!"

"Certainly," she said aloud; "implacable enemies,

ending with death or disgrace; but, unfortunately, in plays there is always the reconciliation scene at the end. It leaves the audience in a better frame of mind, and one goes home vowing to forgive and forget all one's pet aversions. A vow which is forgotten the next morning."

"Rather, to forgive but never to forget," said Magdalen scornfully. She rose slowly from her chair and leant against a tall stone vase in which grew a large geranium in full flower. For a moment her head bent towards the plant and her cheek rested against some red petals. It was a beautiful pose, and Brice was fascinated. Did she mean him to be?

"My dear Magdalen! take care, though that is not a pot of basil," said Lady Mary, shooting a stray arrow and hitting an unexpected mark.

Magdalen drew back quickly.

"Let us go in," she said, with a frown; and on her return to the drawing-room she sat down at the piano and played on without her notes in the gathering darkness. She played beautifully, but not in a professional manner; her expression was more often according to her feeling of the moment than in the spirit of perfect interpretation of the master, and to-night she put her feelings into one of Chopin's pathetic movements. Lady Mary went to her writing-table and was soon absorbed in her plays. At the open window Frank Milton now and then paused to listen to the player, and Brice soon rose to join him; when

the two men re-entered the room, for the dew was heavy, they found the ladies in their gayest mood.

Magdalen was so charming that Frank Milton remarked to himself: "The Magdalen has either guessed the riddle, or is beginning one of her campaigns; I suppose Leslie is the game. No quarter given, but some victims prefer death to hopeless slavery. Mary is too sanguine. Who can bind a woman of forty? She knows every dodge and has learnt every artifice. Mary always says I am unfair to her, but, all the same, I am inclined to say, The gods preserve him!"

"Pray, Mary," he continued aloud, "have you selected your play, and is it to be tragedy, comedy, farce, or opera?"

"I have settled on each in turn, till I'm fairly puzzled. There's 'Isabella' for a tragedy, but really so many fine murders would move us to laughter. 'The Rivals,' humph, we know it pretty well, and ten to one our actors will insist on all the oaths which are classical but might shock ears polite. What do you say to 'Three Weeks after Marriage,' Frank? There are only eight characters in it,—well, no, the people are too ridiculous; shall we have to come down to Shakspeare?"

"I advise you," said Magdalen, rising, "to get a play written on purpose, to 'catch the manners living as they rise' of the present day."

"Shall it turn on learned ladies? No, that subject is worn out. Few gentlemen nowadays know how to

value the 'ineffectual qualities' in a woman, as Mrs. Malaprop says. Mr. Leslie, what do you recommend? Frank thinks only about the scenery."

"Mr. Leslie has no patience for the imaginary," said Magdalen.

"I am only a learner," said Brice.

"What a pity public taste has so much deteriorated," remarked Lady Mary; "here is a lovely pastoral, called 'Rosina,' by Mrs. Brooke. The scene opens and discovers a rural prospect—that would suit excellently well; but I see that 'the amiable authoress' tells us in her preface that the fable of this piece is taken from the Book of Ruth, 'a fable equally simple, moral, and interesting.' Only I find 'Rosina' carefully avoids having any of these three qualities. Was public taste in the days of Mrs. Brooke better or worse than our own?"

"You women are now all *blasé*," said Frank.

"And men dislike all that is simple and moral," added Magdalen; "but I see Mrs. Brooke says she added the comic characters of William and Phœbe 'at once to relieve and heighten the sentimental cast of the other personages.' Evidently every age has its cant. Imagine adding a comic element to the Book of Ruth!"

"And our cant is boredom, I suppose. 'Bored to Death' would be a good title for an unwritten play," said Frank.

"That is not a colonial experience. We have too much to do to waste our energies in that way."

"Well, really, I think you are right. That young Miss Foy looks too—well, too innocent, to be bored," said Magdalen. "Really she could sing Phœbe's song. Do listen to this; I believe, Mary, we could not provide better comedy.

"'When William at eve meets me down at the stile,
How sweet is the nightingale's song!
Of the day I forget all the labour and toil,
While the moon plays yon branches among.

"'By her beams, without blushing, I hear him complain,
And believe every word of his song;
You know not how sweet 'tis to love the dear swain
Whilst the moon plays yon branches among.'"

Magdalen had made them all laugh, but Brice was angry with himself for doing so; he hated Griselda's name having been mentioned, and yet the beauty of this scoffer prevented him speaking out, so now and for the rest of the evening he was almost silent.

Magdalen must have noticed this, for when they separated she found herself alone with him for a few moments; then her whole tone changed, the satirical smile left her lips, and there came into her face the earnest look he had seen there once before.

"One moment, Mr. Leslie; you think that I fear neither God nor man, and you are somewhat scandalised?" her lips smiled to hide the ring of earnestness in her tone.

"Not at all," said Brice indifferently. "I am only sorry to be behind my time."

"Sorry? No, be glad, and believe me when I say

I—I wish I were. Good-night." She gave him her hand as a child might have done, and Brice's anger melted like snow. Was all the worldliness merely a mask to hide a noble soul? At this moment Brice Leslie would have staked his life on an affirmative answer to this question. As it was, he said earnestly—

"Forgive my impatience of the fashion of the day. You will think I am a poor friend to distrust so easily."

"On the contrary, other men are only eager to applaud one's foolish moments."

"I give up the choice of a play," broke in Lady Mary, reappearing. "Shall we have scenes? What! are you two quarrelling again?"

"No," said Magdalen simply, "this time we are making up."

"Frank, the real play is progressing," said Lady Mary joyously, a little later on, "those two are exactly suited to each other."

"Why?" asked the artist lazily; "I should say Miss Cuthbert is not to be suited."

"Nonsense, you know nothing about it; she is tired of compliments, and here is a man who, to save his life, cannot manufacture more than one a day."

"You will burn your fingers."

"I shall make two people happy, but, dear old boy, never fear, I shall not ask you to help me."

CHAPTER XI.

THE success of everything depended on the weather. The moon had kindly consented to fall in with Lady Mary Milton's plans; but would it be fine? would it be foggy? or would a heavy dew make future rheumatism a present certainty? Like a born gambler, Lady Mary staked her all on these bare chances, and her faith was rewarded. She resisted the suggestion of an afternoon affair. How was enthusiasm to be generated on a hot afternoon? No, evening it must be; the lawn must be illuminated; the trees festooned with lights—in fact, it must be Lady Mary's fairyland realised. To do anything like this badly was to court disgrace and failure. An entertainment which turned out an utter *fiasco* would, we verily believe, have broken Lady Mary's heart. Her popularity depended upon it. The artists would laugh at her if she failed, and talk of nothing else if she succeeded. Frank's sitters would be more numerous than ever, and her own fame more firmly assured. "Besides, besides," whispered the bold lady to herself, "*they* have had so much time to themselves that I am sure of success in that quarter. If Brice Leslie is not in love, then I resign my office."

This woman was a greater artist than her husband, and added to this she had dramatic power. She was, moreover, a born general; nothing was too minute for her to overlook. By dint of hard work she had got together her actors and, what was quite as important, her select audience. She had managed to avoid the mass of country neighbours, but she had selected the few who would make the affair brilliant. She had got hold of the barristers, and the clever artists; even the Duke of Blackwater, having got scent of the affair, had managed to procure an invitation for himself and his family. The Duke was distantly connected with Lady Mary, but he was always treated with great impartiality. He was prouder of an invitation from her than of many more apparently greater honours. He would declare that the other women of fashion gave parties; no one but Lady Mary *entertained.*

"They fancy it comes by nature, this art of entertaining," she sometimes said; "on the contrary, it is consummate skill; it requires more practice and cultivation than Frank's portrait painting." You would have endorsed her verdict, had you seen her during this time, and you would have owned that it required a great deal of courage and superb faith to have staked so much on a fine evening.

She settled the question of the play at last by asking a friend, already started on the playwrights' road, to furnish one for her, and if it was good his reward was certain. She was going to ask Acton Roland, the

owner of the Parthenon Theatre, to her fête; he would make the writer's acquaintance, and thus the author's success was a certainty. Oliver Selby mentally fell at Lady Mary's feet and worshipped her. He read and re-read her long letter, as if it were a message from the Mahatmas. She had given him the *motif*, telling him he must manipulate it as he liked, so he shut himself up for a day and a night, had the play type-written, then copied a dozen times, and sent off a post sooner than her ladyship had commanded. She sent him a few words by return—

"Excellent, don't forget the 17th of August. I don't put 'weather permitting,' as that shows so little faith. It is only country clergymen's wives who do this. Don't thank me, I give you a Roland for your Oliver."

Then the actors! Only Lady Mary herself knew what she went through under this head, for no one else did. She had the further merit of keeping all her failures private, so that in this way it appeared she had none.

It must not be supposed that during this time Rosehill was in a state of confusion; on the contrary, the *dolce far niente* life went on to perfection, only the hostess was invisible during the morning hours. The host had discovered a village girl who would serve excellently as model, and the rest of the day he went out fishing. "To think," said his wife, "that Frank actually *likes* standing at one end of the rod waiting

for the fishes to appear at the other! No, the art of fishing passes my comprehension, but I know, as Frank undertakes it, it is a just and honourable calling."

Politeness required Brice to entertain Miss Cuthbert. In the morning there was the long pleasant dawdle after breakfast on the terrace or the saunter through the conservatory. When Magdalen was in her most agreeable frame of mind she would ask Brice about his New Zealand experience and his journeys in the interior. Now and then, however, she would, by one of her cynical remarks, make him relapse into silence; but then she could easily chase away his displeasure by one of her smiles, or by a small gesture of deprecating contrition. At other times she would rise and go hastily away to the morning-room, where she spent her time in writing letters in order to make Brice repent of his silence in solitary leisure.

Once during a New Zealand talk Brice inadvertently mentioned Chester's name, then paused, remembering everything, and remembering also his promise not again to recur to this subject. Magdalen met his eyes and saw his look of contrition.

"Go on," she said quickly.

"Chester one day saved my life, but it is a long story." Brice paused.

"Tell it to me," said Magdalen, almost under her breath. So Brice retailed a bush adventure, in which Percy Chester's heroic efforts had saved his friend from certain death after a fall from a tree.

"Thank you," said Magdalen, with a little sigh. It was the sigh of a tired child. "You, too, were very good to him, I am sure."

"He was my friend."

Magdalen rose and went away after this conversation, but soon the sounds of music in gentler, more subdued tones than were usually heard when Miss Cuthbert was at the piano were wafted through the open French windows.

Brice remained on the terrace dreamily listening until he took out a letter from his pocket—a letter he had read but very hastily at breakfast, and now wished to read again.

It was one of Griselda's simple epistles, full of joyous happiness, full, too, of little nothings which she was sure would interest Brice.

"When you come back," she added, "we will have two canoes and race down the canal. There is a man near Aldershot who keeps them—little beauties they are. Mind you enjoy yourself, dear old Brice! Tell me if you still admire Miss Cuthbert; you were not so much smitten with her as I was. I mean soon to come and stay with my cousins if I can be spared, and we could meet sometimes. No one will discover we are lovers. Won't it be charming!"

All at once Lady Mary came out accompanied by Miss Cuthbert. The former held a bundle of papers in her hands.

"It is all settled," she said; "here is my play, and

now for my actors. I know that they are proverbially tiresome people. My playwright has done well, I give him credit; but he sends a pathetic appeal about the actors. Listen: 'For Heaven's sake, dear Lady Mary, fly from unworthy amateurs. It will now be possible to get down some professionals. You have only to wire, and I will arrange it all. It will ruin my prospects and your party if you admit bungling actors.'"

"Authors are proverbially susceptible," said Magdalen, casting her eyes over some loose pages of typewriting. "Here are seven characters in the play; this necessitates three or four of the actors being really good."

"Excuse me, Magdalen, *all* of them must be good. In short plays, the whole must be perfect. If a diamond is small, let it be of the first water, and no black speck visible. But *you* can have the part of Esther, I am bent on that; I am come to ask Mr. Leslie if he will undertake the hero—save the mark!—for our hero is very weak. I have a recollection of hearing you had talents in the acting line, but I shall trust you all in all, or not at all."

"As a young man," said Brice, taking the copy in his hand, "I believed I could play all parts. I am more diffident now, but when I have read the play I will give you a faithful answer."

"The truth is, I prefer good amateurs in a thing of this kind to your mediocre professionals. They have little tricks and mannerisms to which only distance

can lend enchantment. True, they make themselves heard, but some of their vulgar additions are better not heard. Captain Sparks will do Sir Anthony Croft to perfection; you, Magdalen, shall be the rich Esther, but what about Meta Bruce? I declare that pretty Miss Foy would suit admirably, only I should doubt if acting were in her line; do you know, Mr. Leslie?"

"No, oh no, I am sure she could not do it," said Brice quickly. Griselda should not come into all this.

"Well, there is that nice little actress, Lottie Linden; she acts very well, though she can do nothing else. Strange that that gift is sometimes the one talent of stupid people, I suppose because they possess a high degree of receptiveness. I will telegraph to her. Mr. Bruce the lawyer must be well done, I think he shall be a professional—tricks will not matter; and also for the butler—amateurs overdo servants. The Jew—anyone can do that."

Brice, who had been casting his eyes over the play, now looked up.

"This is a difficult part, leave me out." He found Magdalen looking at him.

"If you can act at all it will not be very difficult. Please say 'yes.'"

"Do you wish it?" said Brice. He did not know that he was being led away by the sudden gentleness of Magdalen's voice.

"Yes."

"You cannot refuse," said Lady Mary, success-

fully hiding the smile of pleasure that came to her lips. To see Magdalen asking a favour of anyone was a strange sight. At that moment the little lady would have staked a very high sum on her success.

"Very well, I accept."

"Now I see triumph before me," said Lady Mary. "Discuss your parts and, pray, do not fail me. Leave the rest to me. We will rehearse the evening before. By the way, I'll write a note to the pretty New Zealander; she will be a help, or shall I say an inspiration?"

Lady Mary was gone before Brice could answer, and he was left alone with Miss Cuthbert, who was reading the play entitled "Unlimited Credit."

"Not bad, but it all depends on good acting. It is a pity life's success cannot be as well assured beforehand as a play," said Magdalen.

"What? Assured by good acting?"

"Yes, when good earnest fails."

Frank Milton adored fishing more than ever during this period of probation; Magdalen in her new mood upset his calculations; he was rather sorry for Leslie, for he could not doubt that if Miss Cuthbert resolved on conquest she would succeed. This play seemed the last link in the chain of events, but outsiders, we are told, see more of the game than the actors themselves, and strangely enough something was taking place which no one could have foreseen. Magdalen had found Brice difficult to attract; she had begun

playing with fire, and suddenly she had felt its warmth. Brice was very unlike Percy Chester, but to Magdalen he seemed as if he inherited all the good points in his character and none of the evil. Now and then she suddenly stopped short in some cynical remark, because she knew he would disapprove. Magdalen was angry with herself and determined not to be conquered. Only one human being had ever enslaved her will and her heart, and she had long ago resolved that none other should do it again. Had she been entirely devoid of noble qualities she would have been able to keep this resolution; as it was, she was horrified to find herself caring—yes, caring for Brice's good opinion.

As for Brice, he shut his eyes to everything; he called nothing by its right name, and he refused to see that he was running into danger. Miss Cuthbert was beautiful, clever, fascinating, but how plainly also could he see her faults—and a lover never sees faults; there was but one perfect woman for him, and that was Griselda Foy. In the meanwhile "Unlimited Credit" was studied; now and then the two began to rehearse, till laughter or discussion made them break off.

Magdalen one day found herself dressing in blue, because Brice had admired that colour. When she realised what she was doing, she paused before her pier glass, and blushing, even though she was alone, angrily threw off the dress.

"No," she murmured, "let him like the colour I wear; why should I care about his taste? That weakness was only for *him*, only for him, and he did not care enough; but I was not altogether mistaken; for this man—this Brice—he loved him, knowing everything. Brice is a true friend. Brice—Brice. No, the name cannot raise the same echo as Percy. I am a fool, a fool!" Then she leant back in the great arm-chair near the window and softly hummed an old French song—

"Hellas! pourquoy m'a-t-il lessée?
Je ne luy ay ne fait ne dit
J'avoye mys mon amour en luy,
Mais je voy bien qu'il m'a trompée
Que veux tu que je te donne?
Je t'ai deja trop donné:
Je t'ai donné une rose,
La plus belle de mes roses
Que j' avais sur mon rosier."

"There it is," she thought, "the thing is as old as creation. I am not the first woman who has been forsaken and left with a bare rose-bush. What is the worth of a late autumn bud? It has no scent, it only looks ridiculous."

Even as she spoke, however, she noticed Brice below, pacing up and down the terrace; she could see the tall, manly figure, the broad shoulders, the profile *perdu* of the grave, earnest face; the bearing entirely free from the superiority of the sex; and once more she seemed to hear again his few words, "He was my friend!"

He, Percy, would have liked to have heard those words. If love cannot come twice, then there is something very beautiful in friendship. She rose slowly, and in a deprecating manner she opened a drawer and took from it a soft blue wrap, which she threw in a careless picturesque manner round her shoulders. She had conquered in the question of the dress, but she compromised it with the shawl.

A few moments afterwards the two were walking side by side, but the usual flow of conversation was conspicuous by its absence. Silence is sometimes very unwise in spite of its being called golden by the proverb.

This little episode took place only three days before the play was to be acted, and it was the same day on which Lady Mary received a letter from Griselda, saying how much she would have liked to accept her invitation, but she had already promised to stay with her cousins, the Hopes, at the Rectory. If she might come and see the play and help in any possible way, she would be delighted to do so.

Lady Mary tossed the note lightly towards Magdalen. The gentlemen had already gone out; now that some practical results were required, Frank Milton gave up his fishing, and he and Brice were delighted to turn carpenters, to plan, paint, and put up rustic seats. A stage was erected; carpenters came from the village, one from town, bringing with him an upholsterer, who found that instead of telling his

employer what was the fashion, he had only meekly to listen, take orders, and if he deviated from the right road he had to retrace his steps. Rosehill was closely shut off from the outer world, for on the important day everything was to be surprise. Even the weather-glass appeared to behave with wonderful consideration, going down a little, and then making a bound upwards on the evening of the rehearsal. There were slight drawbacks, but not many, the generalship had been too superb. The supper-tent sent from London had mirrors down its seams. Frank Milton exclaimed in dismay that an artist could not endure this, but flowers were soon procured to hide this barbarism.

Just before the rehearsal, Brice Leslie had a note given to him. It was from Griselda, telling him of her arrival, and begging him to come and see her that evening, if possible, or, if not, to come the next morning. There was more than enough to do, so he really found it impossible to comply with her request that evening, for the actor who had to play the butler did not turn up, and Brice read the part. Lady Mary often wanted a messenger, and Frank appreciated Brice's engineering skill, whilst even Magdalen appealed to him. The result of the rehearsal, however, was brilliant; at least, Lady Mary smiled when it was over; she knew that any small hitch or imperfection would disappear on the next night. The trial illumination was successful; Rosehill gardens looked like

fairyland, and in the midst of all this her ladyship had time to note progress in her love-story.

"The experiment has been successful; if Magdalen is not in love I do not know womankind; and as for Brice Leslie—but that was a foregone conclusion, given the Magdalen's wish for such a realisation." Thus, to herself, spoke the brilliant hostess of Rosehill.

The day of the play dawned at last—hot, cloudless, a dry heat which betokened no great continuance of this perfection of weather, but which drove away fears of rheumatism. There was little left to be done; Lady Mary hated hurry and flurry, calmness being an essential part of her talent.

"We are ready," she said after breakfast, "and I must congratulate you, Mr. Leslie. Of course, I knew all about Miss Cuthbert's talent beforehand, but really last night you seemed to understand each other perfectly." Lady Mary tried to say this in an indifferent manner, but Magdalen answered—

"There is nothing much to understand in such a simple part, and the professional kindly praised me. I admire the way they scorn us, as if ladies did not understand being themselves better than any of them can play at being someone else. But if you don't mind, Mr. Leslie, I should prefer rehearsing the last scene once again presently."

"Of course." Then Brice remembered that he was not a free man this morning, and found an excuse, but

not the real one. Magdalen believed it, and agreed to put off rehearsing till later on in the afternoon.

The Rectory was some ten minutes' walk from Rosehill, and it would not take Brice long to reach the pretty gabled house, but he walked slowly all the way. He felt as if he were in a dream. He did not argue out anything, he was in a dazed state of mind which he did not analyse. Why should he?

When he reached the Vicarage, he was met by Mrs. Hope, a little woman of great common sense but of small imagination.

"How do you do, Mr. Leslie? How curious you should come just now. Griselda said most likely you would call, as you are neighbours at home and know her people so well; but the dear child has sacrificed herself; she is playing the organ, and she has undertaken a choir practice to save me, the schoolmaster having gone away for his holiday. I can't ask you to go the church, as it disturbs the boys to see strangers; do stay an hour, and then she will be free."

"How could Griselda be so good-natured!" thought Brice. Should he stay? No, he might be wanted. He took out his card and wrote at the back of it—

"So sorry not to see you, but I must run back. Come early. Lady Mary expects you, but I fear I shall be invisible till after the play. B. L."

Then he said a few nothings to Mrs. Hope, and,

instead of altering his course, returned the way he came, much as did the disobedient prophet of old.

He was not rewarded; the small drawing-room was empty; the large one was taken up with actors, servants, people coming and going, and, impatient of circumstances, Brice Leslie, still in his dreamy mood, wandered out into the shrubberies, then slowly he made his way to the summer-house. He sat down and gazed at the scene before him. The distant corn was partly reaped, what remained uncut was bending with a slight undulating motion, causing shadowed ripples to appear on its indented surface. Beyond, dark green trees surrounded with a soft haze of heat, hills of deep blue, then more distant blue trees, and coming towards him on waves of softest air sweet sounds of Nature were audible—the skylark's calls, the softest buzz of gnats, the passing bees, the dull drone of the humble-bee, the bursting of fir-cones like miniature artillery reports from the muskets of some fairy regiments. Then, all at once the summer-house seemed too confined for him, he walked slowly out of it and stretched himself down on the delicious heather, here growing high and tender. Everything around him was blue and beautiful, and after a long time a portion of the blue sky above him seemed to detach itself and suddenly to become a soft down-like cloud. From it rose a beautiful head with waving hair in rich profusion, blue eyes full of deep meaning and scornful sadness changing into unutterable yearn-

ing—and then, blotting out everything came a smile, good heavens! a smile sweet enough to turn a man's brain, so full was it of softness and tenderness, such as he had never seen before.

He sprang to his feet and found Magdalen by his side. Not knowing what he did he held out his hand, but he said nothing. Suddenly the smile in her face died away, the lips quivered, and very gently she put her hand into his, but she too was silent.

In another moment, however, Magdalen's voice broke the stillness.

"I came to fetch you," she said, and suddenly she let go his hand; but it was too late, he had felt her touch in his innermost being; outwardly he remained calm and followed her, merely saying "Thank you," but his whole soul was transformed, his life changed.

That was the real play they played—what was to follow was merely a farce!

CHAPTER XII.

THERE is a certain class of French writers who appear to have been apprenticed—for a year at least—to the most fashionable upholsterer of the time, so clever are they in their descriptions of furniture and of dress. This inventory-taking is not a difficult trade to learn, but the question remains whether it in any way conduces to make the reader realise the room, the place, even the women whose clothes are so minutely transcribed for them. Take a Van Beere and a Claude Monet, place them side by side, and you will have no difficulty in deciding that the first, with its wonderful finish, is on the verge of being vulgar, whilst the other at once raises the imagination to a high level. In like manner a reader's imagination supplies far truer details than word-painting can ever give, details which, instead of diminishing from the effect, serve to enhance it.

The French author, however, was not present at Lady Mary's party at Rosehill, yet some English author certainly must have been there who, on this occasion, turned journalist or reporter, for, the next day, the London evening papers described the lively scene,

and the day after the county journals had full details, though most of these were not true to life. The chief names were, of course, duly chronicled, though they became slightly altered before the world read their titles. The Duke of Blackwater was said to be accompanied by the Duchess, the truth being Her Grace was not there; but two of the Duke's fair and stout daughters took her place, whilst their brother, Lord Colefoot, came direct from London, he having been in town "on business" of his own invention.

Titles, like silver in the days of Solomon, were of no account that evening. Their owners hoped, by their presence and their affability, to secure a promise of a picture; but Frank Milton was, to use a common expression (trade and art have interchanged terms), booked for two years ahead; he therefore accepted the many gracious smiles he received as a personal tribute to Lady Mary. The business of the guests was to admire his wife and her unique party, on which occasion the fashionable artist had turned into a stage-manager. Of course there were brother artists there; one of them remarked that stage-painting was more in Milton's line than portraits, whilst the great Tongham put up his eyeglass and said "Humph"—an expression which meant he was thankful he was not another inglorious Milton.

The local papers expatiated on the ladies' dresses and on the illumination. They made jokes on the stars, the shining eyes of the galaxy of beauty. An-

other *Evening News* understood that the play had been written for the occasion and had been rehearsed a hundred times, so no wonder the acting was so perfect. The *South Courier* remarked that the well-known and much admired Miss Cuthbert acted divinely, and was said to bear away the palm from Miss Lottie Linden of the Star Theatre, which paragraph made Miss Lottie throw down the paper in disgust and mutter something about the snobbism of county papers, but she too, at the bottom of her heart, had admired Miss Cuthbert's performance, never having seen such good acting in anyone who was not "in the profession."

As for the illuminations, the descriptions all agreed that such tastefully-arranged festoons of light had never been seen before. Such a union of art and nature had seldom been so successfully accomplished, and Lady Mary's luck in having a perfectly hot and dry evening was unprecedented. All the fine descriptions both pleased and saddened the persons who were not present.

Oliver Selby had come early, but he was in such a nervous and anxious state of mind that he wished himself away. He carefully avoided the great Acton Roland who sat in a vast arm-chair worthy of the sitter's proportions, and listened attentively, applauded seldom, and kept his opinion wrapped away in his own soul. If many hang on your words, it is wiser the words should be few, and Acton Roland feared and avoided private theatricals as other people fear and

avoid a cholera-stricken district. Only an immense belief in Lady Mary, and a wish to have his name mentioned after or before that of the Duke of Blackwater, drew him to Rosehill; but he was heard to say afterwards that really he had thoroughly enjoyed himself; that well, yes, he had not refused to have young Oliver Selby introduced to him.

This latter was so much perturbed when he was presented to the great man that, in reply to his remark, "A very nice play, Mr. Selby, allow me to congratulate you," he stammered forth—

"Yes, it is a very nice play—I mean, it might be improved."

"I was going to say so," said the owner of the Parthenon. "In fact that is what most struck me in it."

"Yes, of course," said Oliver Selby, recovering his self-possession, "it could be altered, but the alterations might not improve it." The great man put his eye-glasses again in their exact position and looked his author over from head to foot; then he said to himself that Selby was not a fool, and secretly decided that he would take the play and try it at the Parthenon, with alterations, of course, though even with amateurs it had acted splendidly.

"Alterations certainly *would* improve it; your end is poor, the stage would require something better finished. But, if you will call upon me in six weeks' time, I shall be pleased to discuss it with you; after

that we can see. By Jove, though, that Miss Cuthbert is a loss to the stage."

Lady Mary had been as good as her word, it *was* a Roland for her Oliver.

But this conversation is premature.

The company were asked to come at eight o'clock, and this time curiosity made them punctual. As the party was not to be the usual entertainment known by the name of a "Squash," those invited did not put off their carriages till the last possible moment; but some time before the first of the carriage-folk was announced Griselda Foy appeared at Rosehill.

She wanted to help in the preparations as much as possible, and further she was prepared to enjoy herself. She had been much disappointed at having missed Brice, but she knew that he was busy, and she was not going to worry him on account of her disappointment.

Mr. and Mrs. Hope were to come later—Lady Mary had made an exception in their favour; but Griselda, wrapping a cloak over her white dress, entered the Rosehill grounds soon after seven o'clock. The hostess was giving a last look round. As she caught sight of this first guest she was suddenly struck by the girl's unconsciousness of her own Undine-like beauty and simplicity, a simplicity which had nothing inane or silly about it. Some men, she thought, would fall in love with her at first sight, not a man like Brice, but still—was there any danger? It

was only a stray thought that flashed through her brain, and she dismissed it at once. The next moment she was the gracious hostess.

"I am so glad to see you, Miss Foy, you see I am not dressed yet. What do you say of the present appearance of the lawn? The grand transformation scene will come later, but these summer-houses full of flowers and twinkling lights have already a pretty effect. The guests are to explore the domain at their own sweet will, and the stage is only to be revealed when the play is ready to begin. Everyone likes a little surprise, a childish feeling one never gets over."

"It is like fairyland," said Griselda. "What can I do to make it still more perfect? In New Zealand we should never have thought of all this, though we had such exquisite flowers all about us."

"Art and nature can combine in practised hands
But come into the house; I want little bouquets made up—that is, if you will condescend to help Miss Cuthbert, who is doing them all alone."

"I should like it above all things," said Griselda.

She was longing to see again the divinity whom she had so much admired.

In another minute she was in her presence. Magdalen was dressed in a beautifully-fitting tea-gown of wondrous salmon-coloured silk. She was not to be seen on the stage till the right moment, so she had offered to manipulate flowers. She looked up as Lady Mary introduced Griselda, and a sudden idea also

struck her, so vague and undefined, however, that she did not frame it into words—

"Here is our brave New Zealand amazon," said Lady Mary. "I think, Magdalen, she looks now more like an Undine fresh from the spring. Make her useful. I must dress and see to a few last details, so that nothing shall fail."

Magdalen paused a moment, and as if by common consent the two looked at each other in silence. Griselda was thinking how beautiful and how fascinating was her companion, and Magdalen said to herself, "She is his neighbour." Then a smile parted her lips at the bare idea that there could be any rivalry between them. Rivalry! Why? What about? She had not given in—not yet, even though her heart still beat quicker at the remembrance of that meeting near the summer-house, where Brice had so clearly, if mutely, revealed his soul to her.

"Sit down, Miss Foy; you must not soil your hands or your gloves with these flowers, but I am glad of your company. What did you think just now of your first peep at Lady Mary's fairyland?"

"It *is* fairyland! How fortunate that it is such a warm evening; everything is perfect; and the play, *that* I am sure will be perfect too, if—if you are to act in it."

Griselda's eyes expressed her admiration, and for a moment Magdalen smiled. She was not so much accustomed to the admiration of her own sex as to make

this homage unpleasant; on the contrary it gave her intense satisfaction, for Miss Foy was herself beautiful, though of such a different type of beauty. A new conquest is more appreciated, if it is itself worth conquering.

"Lady Mary will not countenance imperfection, when personal labour can procure something good. We are all on our honour to help her to achieve success. Her plans never fail. Besides, we were fortunate in getting Mr. Leslie's support."

"Mr. Leslie used to help us often in New Zealand with our childish charades; I know he can act well," said Griselda simply, and she hid a smile of happiness in a half-blown rose. The utterly natural manner of the white Undine reassured Magdalen.

"You are young enough to enjoy everything," said the elder woman with a faint sigh. "Once I could do the same. Well, we have enough bouquets, I think, but this rose is a dream of perfect beauty. Ah! I see where it should live—and die."

She walked across the room and pinned the flower on Griselda's dress, where already a much less beautiful blossom was reposing. "Let me change this; with your white dress and your fair hair you will be like a moonbeam. Shall you be sitting with Mrs. Hope? I shall look out for you."

Griselda was young, enthusiastic, simple, loving, and spontaneous. She shyly kissed the hand that had pinned in the rose.

"Thank you, how kind, and—how beautiful you are!" she said, from the bottom of her heart.

Magdalen laughed softly. There was no bitterness in her laugh this time; she was happy, consciously happy, she knew why, and yet would not acknowledge it; some of her beautiful far-off youth seemed to have come back to her and once more whispered the word happiness in her ear. Was it a St. Luke's summer in her life? a mirage in the desert? No, not a mirage—a wonderful reality; it was close to her, she felt that her hand could grasp it—the hand that Brice had touched.

"My dear child, you must go now," she said softly, and kissed the peach-like cheek of Griselda Foy; "you are young, that in itself is worth any beauty. If you find happiness, keep it, don't let it go—if you can help it. Do you read Shelley? No? He says, that 'joy once lost is pain.'"

"You ought to have nothing but happiness," said Griselda, and there were tears in her blue eyes. "Happiness is—oh, isn't it beautiful!"

At that moment Mr. Hope knocked at the door and claimed Griselda.

"Come, Griselda, everyone is arriving, and you ought to lose nothing of the sight."

Miss Cuthbert was already gone before Griselda could look round for her, and, still smiling with pleasure at the remembrance of her, she followed the Rector into the gardens.

The entrance gates once passed, the company

walked through a hedge of roses illuminated with garlands of electric lights, also hung in fantastic festoons all about a large pavilion, where their wraps were taken from them. Soft music was heard in the near distance when the guests again stepped out upon the lawns to be enchanted by art hidden in multitudinous ways. On one side were seats where roses appeared to twine themselves naturally, and round which lights were twinkling in coloured pear-like globes. Some of the avenues were partly lighted, partly in gloom, so that from shade you walked into a sudden blaze of flowers and lights. Rich carpets were spread in sheltered nooks side by side with heather banks, near which were placed rustic tables, whereon choice wines and fairy-like cakes were arrayed ready for the guests to partake of when it suited their fancy, no attendants being by. Next the wondering guests discovered a concert was going on unannounced, performed for the sake of the music itself and apparently only for such guests as loved sweet sounds; and, further on, a mimic fairy dance of children, children who were apparently enjoying themselves and not exhibiting. Everything had been done to delight the sense of the unexpected, and the guests at once responded to the call made on their imaginative faculties, and were ready to be de lighted.

"We thought that Lady Mary would fail in the country," said the Duke, "but the verdict must be that she has excelled herself."

On the lawn near the house the hostess held her court. Frank went here and there collecting his wife's praises. He was simple, hearty, pleasant, always himself, but Lady Mary was of course the chief attraction. She had a part to play as well as the actors, and she did not mean to fail in it. Instead of remaining in one place to become a hand-shaking machine, she went about among the various groups. She introduced friends to each other's notice, reminded the Duke that he knew the Colonel, or the Rear-Admiral who crossed his path; she thought that Lady Dash must have met Lord Groves at the Inner Temple ball. "Here is Mr. Harcourt, the leading spirit of that ball—for the wicked barristers were lavish of money, so that if poorer in coin they were rich in friends. It was certainly a good example. Your money can be taken from you, but your friends—"

"*Your* friends, Lady Mary," said the Duke, bowing, "would remain true to you."

"Or retire gracefully.

"You think ill of us," said Colonel Karstairs; "I cannot agree with you." Lady Mary lightly placed her hand on his arm, to walk with him towards a mossy bower close at hand.

"To judge by appearances I should believe in your steadfastness," she said, smiling; "but, don't protest, your constancy is useless. I know you are looking out for Miss Cuthbert!"

"I thought The Magdalen was sure to be here—

nothing more, I assure you," said the Colonel, looking round with an earnest expression on his face in spite of his bantering tone, and then he added—

"By the way, the other day Horton was recalling your confident prophecy—I will not call it a wager."

"Hush! it shocks Frank; still, if it had been possible, my dear Colonel, I would have abetted your suit, but what can I do? it is only the unexpected that pleases. You town gallants are too conventional in your courting; you do not fully understand that it is more blessed to give than to receive."

The Colonel shrugged his shoulders—

"We like obstacles, but not too many! After a time we begin to doubt whether the game is worth the hunting."

"Fie! on the contrary, she is superlative."

"Superlatively happy in possessing you as a friend. On my honour you have outwitted nature, Lady Mary; I shall go home and write sonnets on the superiority of art over nature."

"Then pray don't mention the electric light. Frank is afraid of admiring it, because some of our great artists—Tongham among them—have sniffed at it; but Soames, you know the man who paints pretty women and makes them hideous on principle, says, 'Art must bend to our will.' True art repudiates nature. After that, I assure you I breathed more freely and gloried openly in electric light. It all depends on your mental focus."

"You need not fear. This is a triumph. By the way, is the choice fruit here?" Lady Mary pretended to misunderstand him.

"Yes, under the beeches; go and help the ladies, I have done away with waiters. As to triumph, wait till you see my play."

The Duke came up again.

"Lady Mary, there is a young lady whom the men are all raving about. She is dressed in white, and hair *à l'oriole*—isn't that the right phrase? She certainly has been till now well concealed, for no one knows her."

"Ah, my New Zealander! Yes, a denizen of another world, too good for ours."

"And her name—Queen Mab, in person?"

"Miss Foy, of Foy Lodge. Alas, no princely fortune to be expected from her, Duke. Her face is her fortune."

"In my young days we thought that princely, but times are changed."

"American heiresses have ruined the beauty market. The balance at the banker—"

"Strikes the balance at the heart."

"If you will honour my poor fête with *bon-mots*, I shall introduce you to a real heiress; Miss Betham might—"

The Duke laughed and retired. It was known he wanted money for his eldest son, and Lord Colefoot had been given to understand that he must fall in love with a money-bag.

Why chronicle more of the light banter? Lady Mary made wit sparkle; she called forth praise from those who possessed originality; and evidently received a blessing from the evening air, that so softly played among the folds of the beautiful dresses, and kissed the wavy curls of youth, not forgetting to stroke the grey hair of old age.

Suddenly a sound of Indian gongs was heard and bells chimed a melody. Everyone knew the moment had come when the players were to amuse the company, but every guest was already so well pleased that even indifferent actors would have been applauded by them, always excepting, of course, the mighty Acton Roland, who had been taking mental notes and was secretly sorry that Lady Mary did not own a theatre and could not become Mrs. Roland; "because," thought he, "in that line the woman is inspired. She is a great loss to the profession."

A portion of the grounds, before invisible, was now suddenly illuminated, and, without needing to be told, the guests walked on down a shrub-bordered path, brilliantly lighted; then, emerging upon a large open space, they beheld an amphitheatre of seats carpeted with green cloth and adorned with roses, whilst along the sides were roses arched over uncovered seats for those who preferred the night air. Opposite was the stage festooned with electric lights; such a blaze of light and flowers seemed fashioned for fairyland alone.

The murmur of applause was not faint, for even

this company (for the most part *blasé*) was fascinated.

There was no crowding; everyone appeared to have a special seat reserved for them, and the men did not on this occasion prefer to remain standing outside.

Griselda, seated near Mrs. Hope, found several attentive men in her neighbourhood, for this fresh apparition was attracting unusual admiration. The smile that was so real, the manners that were so natural, were not such as could be found every day in London society; for one season often gives a simper to a belle, and affectation to a country beauty who little guesses that her airs and graces afford amusement to the men who collect to gossip at their club.

When the curtain rose, Griselda had only eyes and ears for the play; with her arms folded, she leaned a little forward and drank in every word, noticed every gesture. Was not her Brice there? and the beautiful Miss Cuthbert, whom she so much admired? What mattered a duke's son, or a young guardsman to her—what, indeed?

Mr. Acton Roland was just behind her, and, once or twice hearing his remarks, Griselda turned round and smiled her assent; she really smiled at Lady Mary, who was all smiles, but Mr. Roland joined in and condescended to agree with her.

"By Jove," said Lord Colefoot afterwards, "I sat near Miss Foy, the girl who will make a sensation

next season—a New Zealander; but she didn't know how to flirt, and one could enjoy her remarks. If she had money—but they say she is poor; anyhow, she is not jealous of other women; she did nothing but praise the only rival that could come near to her; Miss Cuthbert, well—yes, she carried everything before her that evening. She knows the arts and sciences of making a sensation."

As for the play—this was the plot of it.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE curtain drew up and displayed a severe-looking library, where Sir Anthony Croft was seated in his arm-chair, engaged in a serious conversation with his son and heir, young Marmaduke.

Griselda laughed softly as she noticed how handsome and young-looking Brice appeared, in a new suit of very fashionably-cut garments.

Sir Anthony was extremely comic in his declamation, and in the way he took all Marmaduke's silence for consent. He solemnly expressed his thankfulness that his heir was not like some eldest sons, whose sad stories often gave shocking interest to the newspapers. All this part was very briskly acted, and the audience at once caught the cue, when the baronet said, sententiously, "But *you*, Marmaduke, you cannot tell a spade from a club; for everyone knows that not one pack of cards could be found here, even if the Manor were ransacked from top to toe, not one." Marmaduke's slight smile, and deprecating glance as he answered, "I am sure of that, sir," made every one laugh heartily. At the end of the interview, Marmaduke asks his father's consent to leave home on

urgent business connected with—here a pause and great hesitation—literary employment. Sir Anthony appears charmed with the idea of his son's future fame as an author, but begs him to return as soon as possible. Sir Anthony's exit is followed by the arrival of Marmaduke's friend and neighbour in the county, Hector Sandley. Their conversation discloses that Marmaduke is so deeply in debt, led on by Sandley, that he does not know where to turn for money, and, of course, dares not appeal to his father's mercy. "He has no mercy for gambling," the unfortunate young man repeats; "and if Mr. Bruce, our new family lawyer, cannot help me, I had better leave the country at once, before my father announces that he cuts me off with a shilling. If I can get out of this scrape, I swear it shall be my last." Hector laughs at his distress, wishes him good luck, and promises to look him up when he next goes to town; whereupon Marmaduke, in his despair, tells him some plain truths about his evil influence, and they separate in anger.

The curtain here fell merely for a few minutes. How the whole scene was shifted so quickly was a secret which puzzled even Acton Roland. It was wonderful for amateurs, he thought. This time the company gazed at an exquisite bijou drawing-room, where a pretty blonde was arranging flowers, and talking to herself in a way probably only indulged in on the stage, where this unnatural habit plays the part of the old Greek chorus.

Meta Bruce, the lawyer's daughter, discusses the advantage of matrimony, and the delights of her friendship with the newly-arrived inmate of their house, Esther Singleton, who, being an independent heiress, has found a temporary home with the Bruces. Meta is young, confiding, and kitten-like; and the contrast to Esther, the heiress, was at once apparent when Miss Cuthbert, in that character, stepped on the stage. There was a murmur of applause from the ladies, and a vigorous clapping from the men, for Magdalen was perfectly and most becomingly dressed, and acted admirably. You saw at once that she was made of sterner stuff, and was of a more determined character than the artless Meta.

"Isn't she perfectly beautiful?" Griselda murmured to Mrs. Hope; but this lady had already heard of Magdalen's fame, and answered severely, "Yes, a handsome woman, but very fast and worldly, I believe."

"No, that must be a mistake, I am sure it is," said Griselda warmly; "look, here comes Mr. Leslie; doesn't he exactly look his part?"

Marmaduke is introduced into the charmed circle of the lawyer's drawing-room, and his eyes at once rest on Meta, who comes forward, explains that her father is out, but begs him to wait for him. Esther has stayed in the background, and by the time she comes forward Marmaduke has already fallen under the spell of Meta. Mr. Bruce's return disturbs the

trio, the girls retire, and Marmaduke explains his situation. He frankly confesses his sins, his utter inability to satisfy his creditors—chiefly a certain Jew, Joseph Levy—and owns that unless he can procure five thousand pounds in a week, he will not be able to prevent the Jew from appealing to his father. "And that, sir, will, I verily believe, kill the old man, who believes me as innocent as a baby in arms."

Mr. Bruce considers how he can help this young fellow, to whom he takes an immediate fancy, without plunging him deeper into debt; and, to make sure that he will be out of harm's way, invites him to stay at his country-house till he finds a way out of the difficulty.

During the week Marmaduke makes himself so much at home, and so happy with the two ladies, that he believes himself a reformed character. He is so attentive himself with Meta and Esther that he hardly knows which he prefers, and pays them both great attention. During the week Mr. Bruce tells Esther how the case stands, and she immediately forms the design of freeing the charming Marmaduke from the clutches of the Jew; but binds Mr. Bruce to secrecy, as she hands him a cheque of five thousand pounds, which at last Mr. Bruce unwillingly gives to Marmaduke. This latter naturally believes Mr. Bruce is the real donor, and forms at once the plan of proposing to his daughter, as the best way he can imagine of repaying the debt of gratitude; besides, when he begins to

think of it, Marmaduke finds he is really in love with the charming Meta.

The love scene which followed was very prettily worked up. Marmaduke, in a frank, natural manner, making his confession how he had formed the idea of marrying Meta from gratitude, but that now he truly loves her. Meta is at once carried away by the young man's words, and thinks him the most noble, the most generous of lovers; but Marmaduke at the end imposes one condition upon her. In his present position they must keep their engagement a secret till he is entirely free of debt; as Mr. Bruce might, under the circumstance, make some objections; but that, when he can again hold up his head, he will at once speak to her father and to his. Meta, knowing nothing of Esther's generosity, or the feeling which has called it forth, willingly agrees to the condition. In another scene, Marmaduke, to avoid detection, pays Esther more attention than he does to Meta, and the former allows herself to believe in him, and glories in the idea that her generosity has saved him.

The day before Marmaduke is going to speak to Mr. Bruce, his tempter, Hector, turns up. Marmaduke tells him he has paid his debts, that he has turned over a new leaf, and that he is on the eve of proposing to the sweetest angel on earth. Hector, with ingenious and devilish cleverness, turns him round, and they go out together—the spectators easily guessing the result.

The next scene represents Esther sitting alone at an open window. Meta and her father have gone out to a dinner party. Esther hears a noise and recognises Marmaduke's footstep; she is much agitated, but she has a smile of pleasure on her face. In a few moments the young man rushes in, looking utterly crushed and wretched. Esther is frightened, but intensely sympathetic, and her sympathy causes Marmaduke to confess he has lost a large sum of money at gambling, that he is utterly undone, for his father has heard of it, and that he believes he is following him and may appear at any moment.

Esther goes hastily to the writing-table and writes a cheque for the amount. In spite of the large sum, she signs her name with a smile on her lips. Then she comes towards Marmaduke, for he has sunk down in a chair, and has buried his head in his arms. She gently touches his shoulder, with a look of intense love and happiness on her face, as she holds out the cheque to him. Marmaduke starts up, looks at her face, then at the cheque, and is speechless. She says softly—

"You have guessed the truth."

"What truth?"

"That unlimited credit is only the privilege of true affection."

She hands him the cheque. He draws back and mutters, "Impossible," and Esther answers—

"Take it, it is possible. I know your generous

nature; if you are weak, you are incapable of meanness, and I am determined to save you."

A noise is heard, and the servant announces that Mr. Joseph Levy desires to speak with Mr. Marmaduke Croft, at the same time he hands him a telegram from Sir Anthony, which he tears open and reads, "I know all, and will come by next train."

When the door is shut, Esther comes towards him again and again puts the cheque in his hand. "Go," she says, "get rid of that vile Jew, and, when he comes, let your father find you a free man."

Marmaduke again hesitates, touches the cheque, and staggers.

"My father!—he believed in me, it will kill him; but I cannot—you do not know—you will never forgive."

"Forgive?" then in a very low tone she adds, "Love forgives everything."

"Love—I love too much to—" He passes his hands over his eyes, hardly knowing what he says. Esther mistakes his words, and comes back hastily, and passionately throws her arms round him.

Levy's voice is heard; there is a knock at the door, and Esther starts back repeating—

"Go, go, give it to him at once, for your father's sake and for mine."

Marmaduke snatches the paper, and as the Jew enters thrusts it into his hands. The Jew stares in amazement, then slowly sits down to write the receipt.

As the Jew goes out, Sir Anthony hastens in, pale and furious. Marmaduke stands conscience-stricken before him, without uttering a word. As Sir Anthony pours forth a flood of reproaches, Esther returns, looks round with a proud smile on her face, and goes up to the old man.

"Forgive him," she says; then she walks across to Marmaduke's side and slips her hand through his arm. "Forgive him, and forget; he is free of debt—all is paid. It is the last time this shall happen."

Sir Anthony, astonished, asks for an explanation, and Marmaduke says huskily—

"Yes, here is the woman who has saved me, saved *us* from disgrace. I owe her everything, everything I have,—even my name, if she will take it."

The door opens, and Meta and her father return from the party.

Meta is charmingly dressed, and looks bewitchingly happy. She has heard of Sir Anthony's arrival, and believes the happy moment has come when Marmaduke will openly declare his love.

On entering, however, she sees Esther blushingly withdrawing her arm from Marmaduke's, but, thinking only of her lover's approaching confession, she goes towards him, saying, "You have come back to-day; I knew you would, I felt sure of it." Marmaduke draws back from her, and Meta, pausing, astonished, looks from him to the radiant Esther.

"Wish me joy, Meta," this latter says, "Marma-

duke is safe now for ever; together we will, God helping us, forget the past. Sir Anthony forgives everything."

Mr. Bruce and Sir Anthony walk away towards the window, and Meta, turning pale and clinging to a chair, looks at her lover and sees only intense sorrow and shame on his face. She guesses the truth, and with a great effort she walks slowly up to Esther, and, hiding her face on her shoulder, says, half sobbing, half laughing, in a strange manner, "I do, I do wish you joy."

Sir Anthony, again coming forward, begs Esther to come with him and Mr. Bruce, and explains to them all her wonderful generosity.

Marmaduke and Meta are left alone, and a scene between them begins by a few moments of intense silence; he sits down, and gradually hides his face on his arms, and she very slowly comes towards him and calls him by his name. When she is close to him, Marmaduke answers, heart-broken, "Leave me."

"No, no, I cannot," she says passionately, "we have loved each other, we do still, or is it all a dream? No, no, it cannot be—I see it all; Esther has been so noble, so generous; you thought to—" Marmaduke shakes his head.

"It was not that," he begins, then pauses; he cannot betray another woman or explain how she has misunderstood him, or how he has allowed her to clear him, and save his father's name from being dragged

before the public. He suddenly kneels down and kisses the hem of Meta's dress—he dare not do more—and she, slowly stooping, picks up her train and gathering it about her walks slowly back, as if she were afraid of being too near to the man she idolises. Marmaduke gets up and watches her retreating figure, makes a step or two forward and then sinks down on a high carved oak settee, his face expressing mute agony. When he hears Meta step on the pavement (she had gone through a side French window into a conservatory), he starts up with a cry, runs forward and folds Meta in his arms, but again she releases herself and pushes him gently back to the settee, saying—

"Good-bye, Marmaduke, God bless you." Then she disappears.

When Esther re-enters, she finds Marmaduke still sitting on the settee, stupefied and dazed by what he has gone through; misunderstanding the reason, she comes and kneels down before him and takes his hands in hers.

"Marmaduke," she says, "all is forgiven; take courage, the future is grand and beautiful; we will do everything together; your father will let us have the Tower House; and we shall be—oh, so happy! We will look after the cottages and learn all the new improvements. My money—our money, I mean—will be useful, and we shall only come to town when we are tired of each other, Marmaduke—that will be very, very seldom, my dearest; do not be sad any longer.

I do not regret anything; indeed, indeed, it is true; and some day we shall be able to—why, almost to laugh at this trouble, and your father will forget that he ever found you less perfect than he once believed you to be. You are perfect for me; I do not wish you other than you are. Marmaduke, look at me; together, together, we can conquer everything—by love!"

Marmaduke rises from his seat and takes Esther's hand in his. Then suddenly he laughs. "Esther, you are good and noble and generous—you can do everything, I believe, everything; but—good God! can you mend a broken heart?"

. . . . . .

The audience waited almost breathlessly for Esther's answer, but there was none; they only saw a strange expression pass over her face, a startled, horrified look in her eyes, and then the curtain fell. The play was ended.

There was a sudden pause, then a loud clapping and a call for the actors; but Lady Mary, standing up, shook her head.

"It is useless to call for them; our author does not allow it. Those returning scenes are barbarous, and against all rules of idealism, for they destroy every illusion. Now, Mr. Roland, your opinion is the real applause; our young playwright is dying to know it."

Acton Roland was too cunning to be taken in, but the interview with Oliver took place, as already re-

corded, and Lady Mary was satisfied. Even the Duke, a fine *connoisseur* in plays, from frequent experience, came to shake hands with the author, who did not know whether to be flattered or whether to be on the defensive. He possessed a sensitive character, but a fine literary judgment.

"We must really congratulate you, Mr. Selby—a capital play. Are you satisfied yourself? Upon my word, the acting must have pleased even Mr. Roland."

"Yes, the acting left nothing to be desired," said Mr. Selby; "as to the play, I am glad your Grace was pleased."

"Uncommonly so, but—well, not quite sure as to the end, you know. You stopped short—hem, a little too short; we wanted more of a good thing."

"Your Grace has been to too many plays: I merely wished to call forth just the feeling you mention."

"Ah, in that case—" the Duke paused. "I see you are in league with our hostess; she prefers whetting our appetites to satisfying our desires."

"Just so; the incomplete has a merit hardly enough recognized."

"Except in respect of supper," said Lady Mary, taking the Duke's arm. "Come to the tent, and there we shall meet our actors. I hope each gentleman will choose the partner he prefers, for to-night at least we waive the commonplaces of etiquette."

Griselda sat a few moments in her place without moving; she was so much carried away by the play

that she heaved a little sigh when Mr. Hope touched her. Something of her innocent belief in life's happiness seemed to have been taken from her.

"Griselda, here is Lord Colefoot, who begs to be introduced to you and to take you down to supper."

Griselda was gracious at once, but she was not elated. Her heart was not in this grand society; she wanted Brice—her Brice; and all the time the young lord talked on of the "awfully jolly play," a vision of the far away New Zealand farm came floating before her mind's eye.

CHAPTER XIV.

BEHIND the scenes, when the curtain was lowered for the last time, Magdalen Cuthbert and Brice Leslie remained standing, not in the attitude imposed upon them by the play, but quite naturally, as if they had just finished a conversation. Brice was conscious that Miss Cuthbert had acted extremely well; Magdalen was quickly reviewing her own efforts, and she was satisfied with herself, for she knew that her ideal was high and not easily attained. She it was who first broke the silence.

"We have not disappointed Lady Mary."

Brice was sorry to return to the commonplace, but he was helped thereto by the appearance of the rest of the company and the hum of general conversation. These were some of the remarks he heard—

"First-rate." "Capital." "Miss Cuthbert, you were perfect." "Not a bad play, but the end!"

"I say," remarked Captain Standring, who had acted Sir Anthony, "I'm blessed if I know which girl he did marry—"

"You know nothing of modern art, Captain Standring. We deal only with uncertainties. Those happy-ever-after pieces are out of date."

Miss Linden, *alias* "Meta," came smiling back upon the stage; she had learnt every movement of her part, and had felt none of it; as Lady Mary had said, she was a curious but not an uncommon example of a being endowed with the receptive and dramatic faculty without any deeper motive power. She was a perfect mirror, but there was only common wood behind the reflection.

Magdalen did not care to show that she had felt her part only too deeply.

"I am going to dress," she said to Brice; "will you take me to the house by the unilluminated shrubbery?"

Brice was of course ready to act as her escort.

"Why do you take the trouble to change your dress?" he said, as he walked slowly by her side. The quiet and silence of the small path they were in was delicious after the excitement of the play. It was all the more charming that they could hear the sound of the distant hubbub.

"I want the play to remain in the region of the ideal," she said.

"If one could command some moments of one's life not to disappear into eternity."

"If that were possible," asked Magdalen, laughing a little, though Brice caught a sweeter tone than usual in her voice, "which moment would you recall?"

"The time just passed—on the stage."

"What! You would be ready to act all the rest of your life? A tragedy, too!"

Magdalen was drawing him on, but she loved him for being drawn on; yet, though she wanted to hear his remarks, she was not sure that she wished to answer them. She was so certain of her power that she liked to play with it a little while.

"Yet life itself is often only a tragedy," added Brice slowly. The terrible weight of his position was beginning to press upon him, he had a curious feeling that he was not himself, but that he was personifying Percy Chester.

"Have we changed places?" said Magdalen, stopping short, just as they reached the private garden door of the house, left open this evening for the inmates of Rosehill. "You know my secret, we are friends—you said so; well, to-night it seems to me as if the other story was a play. I want to wake again, I want to live a little while, I want to—"; she paused, and the words rose to her lips but stopped in her throat—"to love"; but though unspoken they were understood by Brice; aloud she changed them into "I want to forget."

He made, however, a show of defiance.

"You belong to the world, that world we hear the murmur of from here; you would find any other life flat and stale, like a mild draught of watered wine; a pastoral makes you laugh." Brice spoke bitterly and in a low voice.

Magdalen raised her head proudly; her eyes so blue, so beautiful, so defiant, flashed forth her answer.

"And if it did? I have not laughed for years." Then she hurried away, and Brice woke up to the reality. Woke up—O God! to what reality?

He tore himself away from the open doorway where she had disappeared. Had he followed his inclination he would have stayed there; he would have waited for her, disregarding every sense of right and fitness; he would have borne her scorn, he would have forgiven her bitter jests, if only he might have been free to answer her. Brice woke up at this moment to the reality! He was overmastered by a passion for a woman whom he had called heartless, worldly; whose life was so artificial that it required much faith to believe she had a heart at all; whose early disappointment had crushed and destroyed what is most beautiful in nature—a woman's forgiveness and a woman's love. It was a terrible awakening for him, Brice Leslie, who all his life had prided himself on his uprightness, who, whilst loving the sinner, had viewed a guilty love with pitying contempt; who had won—alas, with too little difficulty—the pure and young heart of one of earth's angels. The very knowledge of the fact staggered him and almost crushed him.

But Brice, though he now found out his secret, though it stood revealed to him in all its enormity, though he clearly read it in his own heart as he might

have read it out of a book suddenly opened before him, was not yet conquered. Now that it was so clear, now that it glowed as if written in fiery letters upon his brain, he made a brave stride in an opposite direction, he boldly drew his sword to show fight. His mind once made up, he walked slowly but firmly away, along the path he and Magdalen had just trodden. He could mentally hear her very tread, the rustle of her dress, the tones of her voice, and, worst of all, he could recall that play, the delight it had been to watch her; the knowledge he had acquired of her thoughts, and the involuntary show of deeper feeling she had exhibited. Brice saw it all, and how every motion, every look, had increased the love that mastered him.

"Griselda will be expecting me," he said, half aloud. "I must go back to her, to Griselda." He wanted the sweet name to bring back his peace of mind, he wanted to wake from this mad dream, he who had laughed to scorn the very idea of loving this unlovable woman—he, Brice Leslie, who was engaged to Griselda Foy. She whose beauty and youth and innocence was admired on all sides rose before his mind's eyes, as the vision of the blessed Virgin might appear to a devout and ardent Catholic; but for that very reason Griselda belonged entirely, or so it now seemed to him, to a region of pure idealism, though in reality she possessed a fund of fresh joy which was intensely human. Her very beauty was

too perfect, too unconscious, too ignorant of its own charms, too wanting in the enticing aggressiveness of a less innocent nature to be able to cope with the fascination of Magdalen Cuthbert.

Brice saw it all, saw how dangerous had been the temptation within reach of which he had voluntarily placed himself, and how complete had been his fall, a fall which he had not expected, but which he now saw was merely the natural consequence of his actions.

He could not even accuse Magdalen, for how could she know about Griselda? No, she did not know it, she had not even guessed his secret. If she cared about him, it was a true feeling, for there was no reason, no material advantage about him to tempt her into false love; what they felt was the unexplainable mysterious soul-attraction of two human beings. Then suddenly he asked himself, "But does she care, or is she merely pretending, playing with me as she has done with many others, and am I going to drop a substance for a worthless shadow?" The idea was crushing but wholesome; it gave him a new strength, so that he felt capable of renouncing his own inclination, and struggling on in the old safe path, or, metaphor apart, it made him walk hastily to the supper-tent to seek out Griselda.

In the open doorway the scene was one of brilliant mirth and fascinating enjoyment. Lady Mary, looking her best, was in animated conversation with the Duke, and the rest of the company were also in the

full swing of conversation. There were but two empty chairs representing the absent guests, and these were placed next to each other, the rest of the actors having already made their way to their tent to enjoy the choice things provided for the company. These two seats awaited—Brice recognised it at once—himself and Magdalen. How could he alter this state of things? He cast his eyes quickly over the guests and soon discovered Griselda, but Lord Colefoot was by her side, and he was devoting himself to her, so that no empty space remained for Brice. Made bold by his late decision and his dread of defeat, Brice walked quickly to the table where sat his Griselda. Her quick, joyous glances soon found him out, and indicated by a side look her disgust at having no place for him. Lord Colefoot was delighted to see another moth fluttering round his new wax candle. He put a rimless eyeglass into one eye and looked at Brice as if he were a strange curio.

"Aw—yes—hum; the fellow who acted just now," he remarked to Griselda.

"A great friend of mine," she answered, with a little smile hovering round her lips. "We used to have such rides together in New Zealand." Then as Brice had come near enough to speak to her, she turned towards him and introduced him to the young lord. This New Zealand child was so free from self-consciousness that she was not even shy.

"Mr. Leslie, Lord Colefoot," and she added, "We

were talking of you, of course. How well you acted! It was splendid, quite first-rate."

"Some of you were professionals, I suppose," said the young lord.

"Yes, some of us," said Brice, smiling. "So the rest of us were put on our mettle. There is no seat here, I see. Lady Mary has been generous with her chairs. No one is allowed to stand."

"Where is Miss Cuthbert?" said Griselda. "She was really splendid."

Brice turned round as if to look for her, but deceit was so foreign to his nature that he made no remark. Magdalen had not come back, so he resolved to eat his supper in haste before she did so.

"The labourer is worthy of his supper; I shall see you again," he said, with a smile, addressing Griselda, and then he walked away. How young and fresh and happy she looked—his Griselda! she seemed now more like his daughter; yes, that was how it was. Had he been foolish to win her affection? He was too old for her, certainly he was very old in comparison, her simplicity was intensely fascinating in theory, but—. He sat down in the place assigned to him, and felt as if a ghost were by his side—not Magdalen, but that other woman, the horror of his young manhood, the ruin of Percy Chester's life, his friend's evil genius, his curse. Fool that he was! how could he, Percy, have left a diamond for worthless glass? "Fool! and —well, so are we all," he thought.

He poured out a glass of champagne and drank it down, then he ate a few mouthfuls and felt partly revived; he was strong, and had yet some resisting power. He had been frightfully imprudent, he had been taken unawares; but he was a man, not a weak fool, he would get over this mad infatuation; but Miss Cuthbert—Magdalen; did she—?

Brice rose quickly; a few others had done the same, and were strolling again into the gardens. It was getting late, some of the carriages had been announced, as Brice saw to his satisfaction, for now the evening would soon be over. As he passed out he heard various exclamations about Miss Cuthbert; where was she? Ah, there she was! just coming in. A murmur of applause, greetings, questionings followed. Brice placed himself in a recess where he could observe Magdalen without being seen. She was resplendent in some dark crimson attire; Brice saw only the general effect, but he noted a necklace of small diamonds round her throat, he noted the splendid pose of her head and the waving hair that appeared to have arranged itself into that *beau desordre* disorder which represents the highest art. Her lips were beautiful in colour, her smiles—she seemed lavish of them as the men pressed round her to congratulate her. Then she walked slowly down the tent, she must pass close by him. How he hated the men who crowded about her, how he hated the smiles she gave them so willingly, smiles that seemed so cheap to her.

Such a woman fed on admiration; she was not worth a life's devotion. He was—just then she came within hearing, and the words he heard were—

"Oh, without Mr. Leslie's acting I could not have done it! You must praise him. By the way, where is he?"

Brice experienced a revulsion of feeling. She was after all thinking of him, asking for him; if she gave away her smiles to others, she gave him her thoughts; she— He almost stepped forward and proclaimed himself, he almost walked up to her and before them all took his place at her side, almost,—but then, with a strong effort, he turned his back upon the animated group and walked slowly out into the cool night air.

He did not know which path he took. He was not conscious of the stray couples he met; he only knew that he was flying from himself and from her. All at once some one touched his arm.

"O Brice, there you are! I have been looking for you everywhere." It was Griselda. "That stupid Lord Colefoot would stick to me, and he is so foolish." Griselda laughed happily. "At last I had to say that I was going to look for Miss Cuthbert to help her, but she is surrounded with people. Now, let's have a little walk. It is jolly getting you to myself. Come this way, Brice, and tell me everything. Oh, I have so much to tell you. This fortnight has seemed very long without you. Papa laughs at me for being so studious, and mamma says—" Here Griselda

paused and laughed again, "There, never mind what she says; tell me everything." He placed her hand on his arm and looked at her with his wonderful smile of protecting love. She was accustomed in the old days to his silent ways.

"My little girl has been enjoying herself?" he said gently.

"Yes, very much. If I could have been near you it would have been perfect. But I liked to hear people praising you, Brice. You acted your part so well, oh, so well! and Miss Cuthbert—wasn't she splendid? Fancy, Brice, this evening when I first came Lady Mary took me to her, and she gave me this rose. I have pinned it in again so carefully, for fear I should lose it. I think she is quite, quite fascinating—don't you?"

"To a good many persons, evidently."

"Yes, I am amongst the number. Isn't she handsome, and so—so—I don't know how to express it, but she looks very, very sad sometimes. Not before people, but when she is alone. This evening, for instance, when we were doing the flowers, she made me feel inclined to cry. Do you know, Brice, she seems to me to belong to an old-world civilisation; I feel so young, so modern, near her. In New Zealand we could never have found any one like her. I think new lands are not haunted as old worlds seem to be. I believe that all the disappointed people, when they die, become ghosts and wander about and tease peo-

ple, so that old countries are more full of unquiet spirits than our new homes on the other side of the world."

"I think so too," he answered; then, after a pause, he asked, "Have you seen the illuminated fountain?" He had looked round and noted that there was a stream of people coming out from the supper-tent, and he did not wish to meet Magdalen at the moment.

"No; take me there. Brice, when are you coming home?"

"To-morrow most likely. If Lady Mary will let me go, it will certainly be to-morrow, but I must just help Mr. Milton to clear all this artificialism away."

"It has been perfect! I think Lady Mary is a born genius. She is so very agreeable—a lady of society in the nicest sense of the word."

"Yes, and in its most pleasant interpretation, and she hates dulness. There are few like her."

"How countrified and ordinary it makes one feel to know such people—at least, it gives me that feeling; but you, Brice, you seem to fit in wherever you go. I felt so proud of you during the acting, and I wished to tell everyone that you cared for me, a stupid little thing like me."

"On the contrary, Griselda, if you had said so, the people here would have answered that I was an awfully lucky fellow. You have been very much admired. I began to think that I ought not to bind you

down to a life of commonplace, or perhaps a bush life, when here you might be—"

"What nonsense! You and I are made for country life. I'm sure I should get sick of parties and compliments, and you would laugh at the poor people and make no end of enemies. Brice, can't you fancy how these people would despise our old motto, *A Dieu Foy, aux amis Foyer?* I love parties like this, and I shall love dancing, but I shall never regret any of them—never, when—"

"When what, dear?" said Brice very quickly.

Griselda looked round; there was no one near them, they were alone. The beauty of the scene made her realise something of life's strange mystery, for the play had saddened her a little. Not given to romance, the girl suddenly felt a touch of the strange longing for that love which takes one out of oneself into an ideal existence. She clasped both her hands round his arm and laid her fair head on his shoulder.

"When I am your wife, Brice."

The fountain splashed its illuminated drops close by them, as if a rainbow had dissolved into flowing water. Above, the trees shivered slightly, as the tiniest breath of wind came to whisper its good-night among their branches. Life to Griselda was like this rainbow hue, all variety and all beauty, and Brice was the centre of the iridescent arc.

But Griselda was too young to be cautious, too young to be suspicious, and her casual glance had

decided that the place was deserted. In another moment Magdalen Cuthbert rose from a hidden seat close at hand. She did it so naturally that there was no time for embarrassment or for flight; indeed, Griselda's fair curling hair still touched Brice's shoulder as Miss Cuthbert spoke.

"We both thought this place deserted," she said, and laughed—yes, laughed her little hard laugh that Brice knew so well, the one in which there was no joy and no hope. Griselda ought to have been covered with confusion, but she was herself at once as she momentarily stood away from Brice.

"O Miss Cuthbert! I am glad it was only you, because, do you see, it is all a secret."

"Evidently," said Magdalen, and laughed again, "but I warn you others may come."

"You had better go home, Griselda," said Brice, forcing himself to speak naturally. "It is late, come and look for Mrs. Hope; I must do my duty with the other guests."

He walked quickly forward, and Griselda followed him, nodding her "good-night" to Miss Cuthbert, and adding to Brice, "Oh, dear Brice, don't be annoyed; Miss Cuthbert looks so true, she will say nothing, and I am sure she will understand."

Then Magdalen Cuthbert was left alone. She walked a step back, and sat down again on the seat where she had been so well concealed. Why had she come here? She had, with difficulty, managed to get

away from the admiring crowd, because she wanted to see Brice; she fancied he had not been in the supper-tent. Were his feelings hurt? was he mistaking her? Could he not understand that, at last—after all these years, he, this quiet sympathetic Brice, this friend in a thousand, had touched her poor, cold heart; that he alone, of all the men she had known and who had flattered her, had been capable of restoring animation to a dead thing; that he had made her believe that life was still worth living, and that love was still possible, that *she* still could love. The discovery had been so marvellous, so strange, that she had let herself only very reluctantly believe it, but the very reluctance had been sweet. Yes, she knew it now, her life still contained something worth living for. She had so much to give, and for so long it had been locked away, hidden, frozen, or withered. No, it had only been frozen. Brice had allowed the warm sun to penetrate, and the frozen depth had been moved, and then slowly expanded into love. And now—

After all, he was the lover of another—worse, he was engaged; how foolish of her not to guess it sooner, not to know that all men are liars, and that all men are willing to deceive. That girl, that simple-minded child, *she* had won his heart—she, a mere butterfly, a fluttering, clinging creature who could love any one, who might marry any one because of her beauty, a mere milk-maid beauty—she had taken him from her. No, that could hardly be the case; the time

was not long enough, it was— Magdalen paused in her train of thought and slowly rose and stood by the illuminated fountain. Though there was no one to admire her, she seemed to be posing before herself; she felt that she was a grand, a beautiful woman, a woman who could fascinate when she chose and whom she chose; that any other woman, opposed to her, had very little chance of victory, that is, if she chose— Here Magdalen laughed softly and bitterly; this child, this fair-haired New Zealander, was no obstacle in her way. Was it not plain already that, without meaning it, without knowing it, she had supplanted her, and if she chose—? Magdalen wrapped a transparent gauze-like scarf around her, and it seemed to add a new softness and beauty to her face; then with a slow, deliberate step, she walked back to the lawn where, already, the number of guests was much thinned, and where Lady Mary and her husband were receiving the last gracious and hearty thanks of their friends.

"Magdalen, where have you been hiding?" said Lady Mary; "the Duke has gone, and was so sorry not to wish you good-bye."

"I was walking in fairyland," said Magdalen, smiling; then she plunged into conversation with the various groups of guests, and everyone remarked how brilliant and clever Miss Cuthbert was, and how extremely handsome. The Duke had been heard to admire her, and the Duke—as, of course, all Dukes must be—was a connoisseur in female beauty.

Then, at last, all the guests were gone, the servants ran hither and thither; Frank and Brice Leslie went about examining dangerous or expiring lights; the illuminations depending on electricity were suddenly extinguished, the darkness reasserted itself, only the stars shone out in the still, hot night.

Lady Mary linked her arm into Magdalen's.

"It is over," she said, "really I am almost sorry, and I am so much elated with the compliments I have received."

"It is well over," answered Magdalen, "for you have succeeded; I think success cures all regrets." Lady Mary was struck by something in Magdalen's voice.

"Success is so common with you, dear, why don't you ever follow it up? I know someone who has been in—I won't say heaven, because of one's uncertain knowledge of that region, but in Arcadia this evening." Magdalen smiled.

"You mean Mr. Leslie," she said quite calmly. Lady Mary laughed.

"I name no names. But come, Magdalen, you must be weary; the gentlemen won't be in for some time; let us go to bed. I owe you too much to wish to ruin your beauty."

Magdalen was delighted to disappear before the men came back.

When she was left alone she did not lose her smiles; on the contrary, she went to the great pier

glass and looked at herself with intense pleasure and satisfaction. It was not merely vanity that filled her soul, but a genuine admiration for her own beauty. Her eyes sparkled like living diamonds, her cheeks were exquisite in colour. "I do choose," she said at last; "the obstacle is so insignificant, just big enough to give one enough incentive. He was Percy's friend, and I love him; that child does not matter; I even forgive him, for—he had not seen me then."

CHAPTER XV.

THE next morning three persons at Rosehill woke up with unusual thoughts and feelings. Lady Mary, with a sigh of relief and a smile of satisfied triumph: she had succeeded. She knew she had led a fashion, that others would follow or try to follow her example, and that for a time at least society through her means would be less dull. She would not have changed places with any one in the world this morning. On the other hand, she was just a little uneasy about her other triumph; why had Magdalen looked so supremely calm at the mention of Brice Leslie? was she going to disappoint her after all? It would be quite a shabby trick, considering Lady Mary had set her heart on marrying Magdalen—for love too, not for money!

It was certainly time to apply a little gentle pressure, or to find out where the hitch was. Brice Leslie would soon be gone, but he must not depart without being engaged to Magdalen. Lady Mary was prepared to send the paragraph to the society papers: "We understand that a marriage has been arranged between Miss Cuthbert, so well known in London

society, and Mr. Brice Leslie of ——" (some queer name in New Zealand), "for," she added to herself, "an unpronounceable place lends enchantment to an unknown name; people are afraid to own their ignorance of geography, and they fancy that perhaps the locality may be very famous or perhaps the seat of a millionaire."

Brice himself was fighting a fierce strife between passion and honour. He had no intention of giving way; he hated himself for having fallen so low. He recognised that even if a man is not master of his heart he is master of his actions, and to find out *now* that Griselda Foy was too simple-minded, too much of the pure-angel type of womanhood to inspire a man's most passionate feelings, was certainly a base action, —an action sober morality denounces and society calls an ugly name,—that society which countenances unproclaimed evil but will not condone such conduct in an honourable man.

Brice was engaged to Griselda, and he would marry her. He loved her with the deep quiet love that had grown up with him from her childhood; he loved her because one loves what is beautiful; he loved her because evil and Griselda were lines that had no meeting point.

Magdalen Cuthbert had not really satisfied the deepest longings of his complete nature, but she had at the same time attracted and repelled all his emotions. She had given the lie to his best feelings, and

she had also called forth his passion and his noblest love and pity. She attracted and repelled him, and sometimes these sentiments followed each other in such quick succession that they appeared to be simultaneous.

After last night's revelation, what would she say to him or think of him? Well, it was best so. She would scorn and despise him, without knowing that he had never meant to be overmastered; that he had begun by despising, and then that he had been cut by the edge he fancied too blunt to wound him. If the dream were not over for him it must be for her: she would reject even his friendship. Better to go away at once without seeing her, to find some excuse for flight, than to stay and be scorned; but, on the other hand, that would attract attention, and she would perhaps suffer unjustly for him. Therefore Brice Leslie was ready to endure martyrdom.

And the last of the trio, Magdalen, that morning looked into her glass and saw that her lips were set in the old fashion; saw, for she had learnt to study herself, that the look of indifference was assumed, and she knew that her last state was worse than her first. Only for one moment she softened: she sat down by the open window and her strange blue eyes filled with tears, as she said, brushing them bravely away, "He had better have left me with my dead love, it was sweeter than this new birth."

Then, ashamed of her own weakness, she clasped a

bracelet on her wrist and snapped it fiercely. "It is my turn now," she said, "my turn; he must take care of himself."

And so the three went down and met as ordinary mortals, or rather Lady Mary was delightful, bright, and cheerful, as if she had not undergone unheard-of efforts and fatigue; Magdalen brilliant and caustic in her remarks, Brice Leslie silent, and Frank Milton intensely matter-of-fact about results and damages.

"I suppose it is the husband that pays the piper, eh, Lady Mary?" said the artist, laughing. "What will this little fancy cost?"

"What a vulgar and sordid idea!" said his wife. "Some people spend thousands to give their friends pain; we, a few hundreds to give them intense pleasure. The pleasure-givers of the world are its kings and queens. Now, Frank, how can you complain about the cost of a joint crown?"

"A case of William and Mary," said Magdalen, "one takes and one pretends to give." Then she turned towards Brice, "If Lady Mary takes a crown, perhaps she will bestow something on us the poor strolling players."

"Ah, you clever people are uncrowned kings and queens! Look at Frank, his portraits bring him more fame and money than all my talents can effect or procure."

"Your talents bring you more debts than I can pay," said Frank, smiling.

"Fie, for shame, Frank! if we were not a contrast how we should quarrel! I believe in contrasts." She gave a side glance towards Magdalen.

"So do I," said Miss Cuthbert, "but your excitement has made us dull to-day; suggest something to raise our spirits."

"What a happy thought! After a fitful fever let us have rest; I vote for a barge expedition down the canal. To have no trouble but to be wafted past beautiful things is in itself an excitement."

"I am expected home," said Brice quietly; he had not looked at Magdalen, though he was of course intensely conscious of her presence.

"What, to-day?" she said, turning towards him; "they give you a short time to get over the fatigues; besides, talking events over is better than the thing itself. In duty to all of us, Mr. Leslie, you ought to stay another day."

"If I am commanded—"

"Of course you are," put in Lady Mary. (What can these two be up to? she thought, feeling a little puzzled.) "Can you disobey a Queen's commands?"

"Besides," added Frank, "you wanted to study this new electric battery. The engineer comes again to-day, and you must see him."

"Then the barge, Frank—can you send someone about it? I feel that it is the only cure I can have for the anxiety I have gone through."

"Very well, but why can't the female mind cease fluttering?"

"That recalls the dove."

"And the dove the serpent. By the way, Leslie, are serpents really wise? if so, wisdom always seems a little at a discount. I expect you to be a naturalist."

"We didn't deal in serpents in New Zealand, we left them for the Zoo here." Brice said anything that came into his head. He was thinking, "She wishes me to stay one day more; I may as well. Griselda will easily understand that I can't get away at once. By Jove, what a trustful darling she was, never even so much as guessed anything yesterday!"

"You will despise a canal barge," said Magdalen, looking at him; "but it has its peculiar charm, it gives you time to make up your mind about difficult subjects."

"Hang her, she is making fun of me," thought Brice; "after all, she wasn't in earnest, I believe. She is fooling all the time. Yes, I'll stay to prove to her that I'm not fooled." Aloud, Brice added—

"I've tried every means of progression. There is some pleasure in all of them."

"They've quarrelled," thought Lady Mary. "This won't do. Yes, the barge is really the best idea. No exertion, and nothing to ruffle the Magdalen's temper. At times she is not altogether honey or molasses. Has he proposed, or has he not?"

Magdalen spoke next.

"You'll want a supply of newspapers, Lady Mary, to read what society says about you."

"It's of no consequence what they say, so that they mention me. By the way, I always wonder which of one's guests is the newspaper correspondent in disguise—don't you, Mr. Leslie?"

"A lady, I conclude, they so easily conceal their true occupations."

"You are getting on, I declare. In another month you will—no, I will leave my prophecy well concealed. Come, Magdalen, come and help me to reckon up my liabilities; Frank likes early settling. By the way, Frank, let us take the Duke at his word, and land at the Hall, so that Mr. Leslie may see his show-place. The picture of the Duchess in the drawing-room is one of Frank's best—it is nearly as plain as Her Grace herself."

"I hate show-places," said Magdalen quickly. "Do you remember Thackeray's account of the housekeeper's description—'The side entrance and 'all. The halligator hover the mantelpiece was brought home by Hadmiral St. Michael when a Capting with Lord Hanson. The harms on the cheers is the harms of the Carabas Family.'"

"Magdalen is a born republican. She would suit the New World, Mr. Leslie." Then the two ladies walked away with smiling faces.

"I'll go down the village and wire home," said Brice, rising; "the ladies seem to wish to undertake this barge affair."

"Oh, you have only to please yourself, you know, Leslie," said the artist; "I'm going back to the paint-pots. One can't tell what one's womenfolk will be up to next. One has to go straight on, or else one's sure to fall into snares."

"Sure to," said Brice, laughing, but his was a forced laugh; then he sat down, wrote his telegrams and went out.

But he went out in a strange frame of mind. He wished at one moment that he could go home immediately and never see Magdalen again, and then the next instant he was feeling intense pleasure at the thought of being in her presence for a few hours more, watching the turn of her head, hearing her speak. She should not find it out, and now she knew—

But the strange thing was, Magdalen seemed to act as if she had not met Brice and Griselda together, as if she had altogether misunderstood the scene, as if Griselda had said nothing, and this strange ignorance puzzled Brice dreadfully. He did not know whether he were glad or sorry. It made him madly uncertain of everything, of himself, of Magdalen, even of Griselda; but outwardly he was calm and grave, only just a little calmer and graver than usual, and Lady Mary felt like a hound that has lost the scent, and sniffs about hither and thither to find it again. What could it all mean? Those two must be lovers, and if the party had not sufficed—why, that barge excursion

must put the finishing touch. She would land at Oldham Castle and sketch, they should have no excuse (these contrary lovers), because of course they were lovers; it was no use denying such a thing.

If Lady Mary had known the truth!

The barge as chartered by Lady Mary Milton was a thing of beauty. It was not to be expected that she would allow such a suitable and effective thing as a canal barge to go unadorned by her genius. She wished it to be a Watteau-like creation, one which would serve for the "Embarkation for the Island of Cythera"; she meant it to be worthy of Magdalen's engagement. She had a charming way of settling wished-for events; this lady certainly ought to have had a wider sphere; but, at all events, unlike many of us, she made the best of the one accorded to her. The draping of the seats was charming, the Eastern rugs were of softest harmonies; there were light garlands of wild flowers twined in and out, and there was extreme comfort. There are some artists who are artists of the material, though they cannot draw a stroke. In their hands flowers and stuff both seem to fall into exquisite forms and poses and folds; it is a gift that is born with them and, unlike draughtmanship, cannot be improved.

Frank Milton utterly refused to join this expedition; he wanted to rest in his own way, but so far relented that he promised to ride over to the ruined

castle of Oldham in the evening and to escort them back. He had his doubts about "Mary's mania," but he was a wise man and was not going to interfere. Leslie was soon departing, and then Miss Cuthbert's fascination must end.

It was to be a day of surprises, however, for several persons.

Lady Mary ordered some dainty cakes and tea to be put up in a basket; she meant to make this beverage at the ruins, and they should get back in the cool of the evening. If a proposal is ever to be made, no time is so opportune as towards sunset. She remembered that Frank had selected the evening hour for his declaration; she was fond of repeating this as a fact, though he had often told her the hour of his declaration had been really pure chance.

The beauty of this waterway baffled description to-day, and when the three reached the canal bank they could not refrain from expressing their delight at the glowing richness of the colouring. Brice's silence was hardly noticeable, for the ladies kept up a lively conversation. Magdalen showed no consciousness of his silence, broken as it was now and then by fits of talkativeness. She was acting as if she were a queen and he a mere subject hardly worthy of notice.

"Only one day more," thought Brice, "and then—But hang it all! why doesn't she show what she means and what she thinks of me? Have I fallen too low in

her estimation to make even that explanation worth while?"

The barge was to be drawn by a led horse; a man was at the helm to steer, and there was nothing for the three to do but enjoy themselves.

Suddenly Lady Mary remembered an omission; she had brought no sugar. The castle was a lonely spot where nothing could be purchased, so it was absolutely necessary that they should take all requisites.

It was some ten minutes from a small village shop, and Brice immediately started off to rectify the omission, while Lady Mary and Magdalen settled themselves among the cushions.

"We shall have a lovely expedition, my Magdalen," said the charming hostess, opening her sunshade, "and then I shall lose my guests. All good things end very soon in this world, and my cousin is one of the good things of life. Come, acknowledge that you think so." Lady Mary did not expect an acknowledgment, she fancied she knew Magdalen too well, but she asked it all the same.

"Yes," said Magdalen, clasping her hands above her head, from which her large hat had fallen off, causing a diamond ring on her finger to flash forth light among her dark wavy hair. "Yes, he is a man one could like."

Lady Mary was inwardly delighted, but she turned away, however, to leave Magdalen more free to speak her mind.

"A man one could love," she said very softly.

"Yes, a man one could love," repeated Magdalen quietly; and Lady Mary's heart beat faster.

"Magdalen, my dear friend, if you think so—why, I know that he—"

"That he loves me! Yes, so do I—"

"And you return it. Then, O Magdalen! you can't tell how much I have wished for that—*that* to happen to you. I do believe in love and marriage; see how happy we are, Frank and I; a woman is made to be worshipped, petted, and spoilt through life—for that end she was created, I believe. Of course, sometimes things go wrong, but"—Lady Mary waxed bold—"the past is wiped away when the future looks golden. You, Magdalen, have felt some things too strongly; it is your nature, but even the saddest experiences can be forgotten."

Magdalen smiled, and all her nature seemed to soften and unbend for a few moments as she leant towards her friend.

"You are a true friend, a noble woman," she said, and such words from Miss Cuthbert meant a good deal. "Will you never change, never disbelieve in me, as so many do?"

"Never, Magdalen. There, you see I am not jealous even of Brice Leslie."

"Brice Leslie!" Magdalen's tone was strange and past understanding.

"Magdalen, don't let any—any pride come between

you and a true man's love, I beseech you. There are yet many years of happiness before you; you will give him what he requires; and he—I have watched him narrowly—he has a strong nature, capable of any amount of disinterested affection for a woman he loves. In that he is something like Frank."

There was a pause. Magdalen stooped over the side of the barge and let the water gurgle against her diamond-encircled fingers.

"What do you want me to do?" she said very softly.

"To—to—say 'yes' if, or when, he asks you to be his wife."

Magdalen lifted her head suddenly, her eyes flashed forth a lightning glance, her face flushed and her red lip squivered. Never had Lady Mary seen her so much moved.

"You don't know what you are asking," she said, "but if you care to hear it, to know it, I will promise you—if Brice Leslie asks me to be his wife I will say 'yes.'"

Lady Mary was uneasy. This sounded unnatural.

"But you mean you will discourage him. That will not be fair."

"On the contrary, I shall encourage him—to—to—"

"To hear his fate?" said Lady Mary, laughing nervously.

"He is coming," said Magdalen, pointing to Brice,

who was walking quietly down the bank, and who had been hidden by the ruins. "Perhaps I had better say 'no' to all you have asked me?" Magdalen was really agitated. A struggle was going on in her mind.

"No, no, Magdalen, you have promised, you cannot draw back; believe me, I—— You have been very quick, Mr. Leslie. Now, come in and I will give the word of command to depart. The flies have been teasing that poor cart-horse almost to desperation."

Brice stepped into the barge and found that the place left for him was close to Magdalen. In another moment they were gliding down with that peculiar motion which one can only experience by this mode of progression. Brice spoke first.

"This is charming, and really for beauty it will bear comparison with—"

"Your own canal boats, I suppose," said Magdalen.

"Yes; but here it is more wooded, more luxuriant, more fascinating."

"Less commonplace, in fact; but for ordinary life the commonplace is the safest; we soon tire of the eccentric. Now, Lady Mary, this is the time for a song. Shall it be a duet, or a trio?"

All Magdalen's gaiety had returned; her smile seemed to give out happiness; her eyes laughed with her lips. Brice felt that his courage was going; why had he not run away? He had fancied himself so brave, so bound by custom, so tied by every obligation of right, that he believed he would be hedged in

by it; and that now she knew the truth— But it seemed she knew and did not care; she could be as merry as before, evidently he was nothing to her. It was better so, infinitely better, but he felt the struggle was still fierce, he was weakened by that very unconscious manner of hers.

Brice crossed his arms and listened to the two voices as they sang a little boat-song, set to a strange weird melody, by a friend of Lady Mary, an amateur genius; Magdalen's contralto, though not powerful, was in perfect tune.

The barge meanwhile glided along to the music of the softest gurgle of the keel. Now and then a frightened moor-hen splashed suddenly into the reeds as the boat cut through a sheet of water-lily leaves, or separated the graceful arrow-heads; or else brushed against the tall bulrushes, making the stragglers bend forward as if forcing them to greet the fair company.

Brice gradually turned his eyes towards Miss Cuthbert's bright countenance; it was as if she were a sun, and he but a poor new world, bound to be powerfully attracted, though also influenced by an opposing force, and bound to try and fly into space. Was she acting thus on purpose? was she so cruel as to defy him? No, he would not be a mean coward; he would resist this influence, however powerful it might be.

"Look, do you see, Mr. Leslie, there is a perfect picture: the bridge so exquisitely reflected in the

water, and that solitary cow coming to drink at the shallow part, with its child-conductor. It is a pet cow evidently. You see that sort of thing abroad, but not here often. Surely New Zealand can give you nothing more beautiful."

"Nothing!" said Brice; he was thinking of Magdalen herself.

"But, anyhow, the humanity of the New World is better than ours. Last night there was a fair sprinkling of our richest aristocratic young men, and they had all a very scented kid-glove appearance."

"Nature suits its life to the surroundings," said Brice earnestly; "these young men, I suppose, are framed to combat a scented kid-glove life, whilst we in our New World are easily overcome by what seems to them perfectly natural to everyday life."

"The sledge-hammer has to be regulated by delicate machinery, you mean," said Lady Mary, smiling; "but if you give us the sledge-hammer, we will provide the rest."

"You will take out a patent for it," said Magdalen.

"I fear the iron would be destroyed before the machinery could be adjusted; the finest metal is the most brittle."

"It does not impair its value. Ah, there are the ruins in sight. Now for a gypsy fire and tea at a picnic; one feels a child again."

"It is too early yet; but if you two will guard the provisions, I will choose a spot and give orders about

the horse and its driver. The two men will most likely have hop-tea."

Lady Mary was cunning to-day—quite barefacedly indeed. At another time Magdalen would have laughed at her, to-day she had no heart to laugh; her heart was too heavy for laughter, too proud for tears.

The two who were thus left alone did not even pretend that it was natural, or that they were as usual. A silence fell on both. Magdalen lay slightly back on the cushions and watched the waving willow-leaves which, dipping into the water, were continually being taken down stream for a little way, and yet never could reach further. That was like her life, she thought, always carried forward but never advancing; striving vainly after an unknown unknowable bourne; attached by force of habit to a well-recognised standard of life, but loving an impossible ideal. Impossible? To whom could she turn? she whom the world considered so strong, and who was yet so weak; who— What was she doing? She was softening, and this was certainly not the time to be weak. She clasped her hands firmly together, and slowly turned her eyes to Brice. All the coldness she could express in her eyes was there.

"You will go to-morrow, Mr. Leslie, having learnt the lesson Lady Mary wished you to learn—the ways of the rich, clever, aristocratic world. Outside that circle comes chaos, a bubbling confusion, mate-

rial not yet fused into any known shape, a thing of naught."

"Why should you be ironical, Miss Cuthbert?" he said, in his old impatient tone, that tone which had first attracted Magdalen's attention.

"Why? for convenience's sake, I suppose."

Another pause, and this time the pause was dangerous, for the smile that hovered about those lips was maddening to Brice. Love and something like hatred fought together in him, and he exclaimed—

"What's the use of fooling like this? You know it all—all that miserable story! Why did I ever see you?" His face was intensely in earnest now, and therefore intensely attractive to Magdalen.

"Yes, I know it all—since last night—and who is to blame—am I?" The tone was one of withering scorn.

"You offered me friendship," said Brice, much in the same tone as his earliest prototype, "and I accepted it; how could I tell that—but *you* knew your power well enough."

"Yes, but I did not know yours," said Magdalen, almost under her breath.

Another pause followed, but Magdalen's lips quivered; this time there was more pleasure than pain expressed on them. She had stretched out her ungloved fingers and was grasping the edge of the barge; the blue veins made a delicate tracery down the white hand and the under-part of the wrist. Brice held out his hand and tried to place it on hers.

"Don't touch me," she said quickly and angrily, "you have no right to do so."

"I have," he said, in a low, passionate voice. 'Good God, Magdalen, the right which worship gives to a man."

"A man who is engaged to someone else."

Magdalen laughed scornfully.

"Yes." He was bold now; he dared to look the fact in the face.

"Do you know?" she said, hiding her face by turning it away, so that Brice could only see the exquisite line of neck and ear, "that you are reacting Percy's—life?"

"No, that was criminal; mine has only been a terrible mistake."

"A mistake you are bound to accept."

"Bound—bound to act a lie—no, for the sake of—"

"Hush," said Magdalen. "How can I believe you?"

"I don't know. Tell me how to prove my words?"

Magdalen turned towards him, lifted her hand slowly and pushed back her hat as she slowly passed her hand over the restless waves of her hair.

"Deny that you intended to be silent to-day."

"I can't. I came here meaning to keep true to—an ideal, Magdalen—the reality has been too strong for me. Won't that satisfy you?"

There came the old, short, dry laugh.

"I knew it," was the answer.

"And you have been trying to be cruel."

"No, it is natural to me."

"Then you are incapable of feeling—of—love?" he said impatiently, "and yet you are—a woman, a beautiful woman."

"I learnt it long ago—from a man."

"Percy—good God! Let me tell you what—" But Magdalen shook her head.

"No, I don't want to know. I have buried him—at last—"

"As you will bury the remembrance of this talk, whilst I—"

"You know nothing of what time can do, will do—nothing."

"Nothing. Listen, Magdalen, it is you who know nothing, nothing of a man's love—it is an awful thing; it makes him weak as a child; it eats his life away; it crushes out his existence; it makes the day hateful and the night—— Magdalen, whatever you do, don't laugh; if you do, I shall feel as if I should have only strength to kill you."

Magdalen slowly clasped her hands and for once did not disobey.

"One can see you have not suffered long—or often," she said scornfully. She was not in the least frightened by his vehemence. She liked it. To see Brice Leslie, usually so quiet, so self-contained, like

this was balm to her mind. If she loved—and this fact she hardly dared own or contemplate at this moment,—she still wished to keep a clear brain and not allow herself to be guided by passion; it was such a new experience, she wished to reserve it, to hide it from everyone, almost from herself.

"Time has nothing to do with such things," he said still impatiently. Then breaking off, as if argument was puerile, he seized Magdalen's hand—

"You are so clever, you understand partly, only partly; tell me what you command, and—I can do that, I can obey. With you it is a matter for argument, a psychological study. I don't understand such things. My life out there was so simple, so straightforward; here I seem to be entangled in a net—oh! but there must be simple ways of disentangling oneself."

"Very simple; Percy took one of them," said Magdalen scornfully. "He was your friend."

Brice lifted his head proudly; even for Magdalen he would not deny his friend,—and she loved him for this constancy, at the same moment as she scorned him in words.

"Yes, he was my friend," said Brice slowly. "He made you suffer, but—"

Magdalen moved her hand impatiently.

"Leave him out of this question."

"Magdalen, I can, I will, devote my life to—"

"To make up for his mistake." She laughed. "I am not a girl of twenty."

Brice Leslie was deeply hurt. With his arms crossed he looked away down into the depth of the clear water, he bit his lip to prevent himself from saying something bitter to the woman who was so intensely cruel—was it consciously or unconsciously?

Unperceived by him Magdalen was watching him; she knew she had wrung his heart; she knew that—whether consciously or unconsciously she hardly knew herself—she had drawn him on, forced him to love her. She had done it in other cases, and had not repented; but before, it had not been with men like Brice Leslie. She looked around sadly; the great weariness of life fell upon her, almost overcame her, that weariness that finds comfort in the idea of Nîrvana, in the belief that life itself is a dream of a dream. Was this conflict worth while—she thought to herself, was any thing worth while? Suddenly, bending over the edge as if to seek for what attracted Brice, she saw her own reflection; it quivered in the quivering element, and it was beautiful. After all beauty was tangible, real, capable of being enjoyed and capable of giving enjoyment. What did the rest matter? the gospel of right and wrong might be a myth, but beauty was intensely real.

"Brice," she whispered, holding out her hand, "Brice, forgive me." (This was the first time Magdalen Cuthbert had ever petitioned any one to forgive her.) "But listen, that is Lady Mary's voice, she is in pain —come!"

CHAPTER XVI.

THERE has been a great deal written about the dual action of the brain, about conscious and unconscious hypnotism, about the power of persons, under special circumstances, to transmute nervous diseases. Doubtless, this is an age of wonderful psychological discoveries, discoveries which will in the near future open out an entirely new field of thought. Men's ideas about weakness and will and crime will be modified and revolutionised, and the ancient prejudices which once made our forefathers settle matters of right and wrong in a delightfully offhand manner, that saved them an infinity of trouble, will disappear. The time may indeed come when the still more ancient ideas of fairies and demons may be found to be true, and further, we shall then discover that what in men and women was called inconsistent action, is in truth the work of other separate influences which make up their whole nature, and that it is the supremacy of one of these influences which forms the apparent character —subject, nevertheless, to the chance of a sudden uprising of one of the weaker or partially-subdued elements. In his own person, man is in truth a battle-

field where many are fighting for supremacy. The mystery which envelops us is on the whole still a mystery, though now and then we get glimpses of unrealised possibilities and of vast uncertainties.

Some evil genii were mixing themselves up very much in Lady Mary's affairs this afternoon, or so she thought. In the first place, as she was walking back softly towards the barge, wishing to see how things were progressing, she unfortunately fell over a hidden root, and the cry of pain forced from her at once brought Magdalen and Brice to her help. That was bad enough, for they had to help her up and stay with her till she was fairly out of pain; but then, who should appear but Frank and Frank's brother, who had just made his appearance at Rosehill, taking them by surprise, from the steppes of Russia. After that there was nothing more to hope for, and the little lady only trusted that the short interval of solitude which the lovers had enjoyed had sufficed for them to come to an understanding.

She would have given a good deal to know for certain; but, in the meanwhile, the picnic proceeded happily, the gentlemen entered into the spirit of the thing, whilst the two ladies sat down on soft Eastern rugs and were assiduously waited upon. Lady Mary had not a moment alone with Magdalen, but she noticed that she was quiet, almost sad, and that half her merriment had flown. This, however, might be a good sign. Captain Milton was a very amusing man, who

had travelled much and was a mine of good stories and anecdotes, so Magdalen's sadness was not observable. One sign, however, was very visible, and this was that Brice devoted himself to her, watched her least movement, and answered stray questions from others in an absent manner.

Lady Mary was hopeful, for she knew Magdalen was not a woman to be won in a moment. She, therefore, fancied progress was satisfactory.

The evening, too, was pleasant and cheerful, and when the men came back to the drawing-room there was much to tell the returned traveller, and much to hear from him. Magdalen and Brice could thus talk apart without being conspicuous, and from her corner Lady Mary noted all this with pleasure. Later on, unfortunately, the sky clouded over, the heat turned into a thunderstorm, and rain came down in sheets, amidst the congratulations of the party at its having kept off so long. It was just like Mary's luck, her husband said.

It is impossible to have much private conversation in a room with only five persons in it; but Brice watched his opportunity and managed to say, under cover of Magdalen's music—

"Magdalen, I must go to-morrow." He dared not say more, but he was forced to say this. That previous conversation had been very unsatisfactory, in spite of her last relenting speech.

Since that moment, perhaps something of the por-

tentousness of the deed he was contemplating had come over Brice. He felt that he must be sure of Magdalen, certain of her feelings, before he dared outrage the feelings of some of the best people he knew.

He hated society more than ever this evening. He would have liked all kinds of impossible things; he would even have preferred to run away from everything—almost from Magdalen and her enchantments, from the attraction of her every movement and the fascination of her smile.

She had apparently got over that soft influence by the time he had spoken the words, for, quite heedless of him, she went on playing the piano.

When she spoke it was with a smile on her lips.

"Well?"

"What do you command?" he said, hardly knowing or understanding what it was.

"You forget I am a woman," she answered, under cover of her music, "and you are a man. We were born to obey the lords of creation, I believe."

Brice was angry at her pretended playfulness.

"What nonsense! Sooner or later this must end —I must come back."

"What for?" She struck a chord and looked up, not at him but at the picture opposite, representing some inferior artist's idea of the blessed Damozel. That legend had never impressed Magdalen except as a poetical fancy; she preferred Leconte de Lisle's

poems with their new Buddhist tendencies and Oriental philosophy, or Shelley and Keats, and all their intense poetic charm of pure ideal poetry. The blessed Damozel waiting for her lover seemed too much like life itself to be associated with the thought of a hereafter, if, as Magdalen said sometimes with a look of sadness, there was one.

"For you, Magdalen," he said, stooping, as if to turn the page of a music book, and by that means coming so near to her that he felt her warm breath upon his cheek, "I must come back for you—when I am free." She smiled a little ironically, so he continued—

"You do not believe it? I wish your unbelief were true, but I *shall* come back, and when I do—!" Magdalen lifted her hands from the keys and turned over the leaves of the music book. At the other end of the room the other three were loud in conversation.

Captain Milton was telling a ghost story, and the snatches of it reached the two at the piano. "Well, the lady always would make her appearance upon settling-day, and stood by him as he received the tenants' rents. It was enough to scare them out of their wits, the fellow told me. First-hand story, you know—"

"Not a bad excuse to find for refusing to pay rent," said Frank. "I declare those Irish knaves have a wonderfully keen sense of humour. Just imagine an English tenant—"

Magdalen felt her hand suddenly grasped by Brice.

"When I come back—a free man, promise me."

"Hush, they will see you. Do you think I am one who can receive or give promises? Do you think I have learnt nothing from the past?"

"You have not learnt—"

"I say, Miss Cuthbert," put in the Captain—he was not in the plot and knew nothing of Lady Mary's plans—"now you have done playing, come and tell us if you believe in ghosts."

Magdalen rose and walked forward, much to Brice's intense disgust.

"Yes. Ghosts of one's own thoughts; those are stranger than any ordinary received idea of disembodied spirits."

"Thoughts! Oh, they are natural and all that, but I should like to see a *bonâ fide* ghost. Heard of them, of course, but as to seeing them! Upon my word, though, I've met a fellow who said he had seen the Flying Dutchman. Don't believe a word of it, but—"

"Till you do, you suspend your judgment to the mast-head, Arthur?" said Lady Mary; "but you should have been here last night, and then you might have beheld something better worth seeing than ghosts. To think what one may miss in twenty-four hours!—So you must really leave us to-morrow, Mr. Leslie? Is it positively necessary?"

"Yes, positively; but I have been here so long, I feel as if—"

"Spare your compliments between cousins. You will soon be back again, I know."

"Yes, very soon, I hope," said Brice stupidly; but Lady Mary forgave him, and when they separated for the night he grasped her hand warmly, but he was also conscious of the thought—"If she knew?"

Magdalen paused a little at the foot of the stairs. The gentlemen were going to play billiards, but the ladies were weary and were retiring early to rest.

"Good-night," she said, holding out her hand to Brice, and the smile she gave him wiped away many of her scornful words. Their eyes met for a moment, then Brice repeated her "Good-night," and added "Magdalen" almost under his breath.

Lady Mary had gone on, but waited for her friend at the top of the stairs.

"Well, dearest?" Magdalen shook her head.

"He fancies he will come back to ask me. Say no more about it till then." But all the same there was a light in her eyes and a smile of conscious pride on her lips. She had avenged her womanhood, or so she thought.

"Frank," said Lady Mary that night, "Frank, I've succeeded—or all but, that is—"

"Humph! Well, I'm sorry for him; you know I never approved; she's too—too—"

"Hush, you naughty man, I know what you are

going to say; but you don't understand Magdalen. There is so much good in her, so much nobility—"

"So much of many things. A fine mixture."

"So are we all. However, that will be Brice Leslie's affair, and the poor fellow is madly in love. I left them alone a little this afternoon, and I think they used the opportunity."

"When does the Magdalen not use it?" inquired Frank sceptically; then Lady Mary declared he was unfair to her friend and that she would tell him no more. "We shall miss them very much," she added, "for Brice Leslie leaves to-morrow, and Magdalen a a few days after."

"Where is she going?" asked Frank.

"Mrs. Stewart is still unwell, and Magdalen declares she will go back to town in order to nurse her. Fancy Magdalen in town now! She will be bored to death."

"Bored!" said Frank; "that word ought to be taken out of the language."

"That won't stop the disease, and it seems pretty general. However, once married she will have enough trouble to keep her in health and spirits."

The next day Magdalen did not appear at breakfast, but sent word she had a cold. Brice, however, went about looking intensely miserable, even though Captain Milton was cheerfulness itself, and when the time came for him to take leave, as he was going by train, he asked Lady Mary if there were no chance of

saying good-bye to Miss Cuthbert. Brice fancied he spoke and looked as usual, little knowing that Lady Mary possessed the key of his sadness. She smiled as he asked this question.

"Wait a moment; I'll send up and see if she is coming down. It is too bad of her to—to stay away."

"I am afraid she is suffering," said Brice anxiously. "In fact it is depressing weather, and I think I am indulging in a sore throat."

"The weather has much to bear, it certainly must be a great philosopher. Now, when may we expect to see you again? Miss Cuthbert stays till Thursday; why don't you ride over and wish her good-bye then?"

Brice looked relieved. "Thank you, that will be best; wish her—good-bye for me now. I owe you so many thanks for a very pleasant visit, Lady Mary, but how shall I thank you?"

"You have forgotten the play, the gratitude is on my side. You and Magdalen were great successes. I hope you will keep up that character. Good-bye; you must go at once, Frank is beckoning." Brice hurried off but retraced his steps. "Will you tell her that I will ride over on Thursday—for lunch, if I may?"

"Yes, yes; come, by all means—you will be always welcome."

Then Brice drove away, looking up surreptitiously

at Magdalen's window, to see if by chance she were there, but all was silence.

Magdalen had really caught a slight cold, but the reason of her absence was a wish to avoid a leave-taking. "He will come back," she said several times to herself, "he will come back a free man. Brice, Brice, if you only knew! This time it is the biter bit. This time—Brice, Brice." She knelt at the window and, peeping through a crack, looked at his retreating figure as if she would willingly follow him.

As for Brice, he drove away in a kind of dream, a nightmare rather. The deluge had overtaken him, the waters were all about him, and he could see them rising visibly whilst he looked on fascinated and horrified, yet quite unable to act. Was he really himself—the Brice Leslie who in his youth had been able to look on coldly at the follies of others, who had at times found himself wondering at such things being able to tempt men away from their ambitions and their superior interests? Who was this Brice Leslie who was ready now to throw away everything, every consideration, every standard of right and honour, for a woman no longer young, no longer capable of giving a man what is a woman's best gift—youth and simple loving devotion; a woman who would require everything of him and perhaps would be incapable or unwilling to give much in return?

Yet this mad love, born in such a strange manner, was really engendered by all that was noblest in Brice.

One could almost have said that nature was revenging herself for past scorn of her rights, that Brice was bound to learn suffering through love and love through suffering, that his beautiful ideal courtship of Griselda was not to be given to him to enjoy (having paid no price for it), that man cannot live in the ideal without sooner or later finding that some perverse demon will revenge itself and pull down his fair palace.

One side of his nature craved only to keep true to his first love, to reject all temptation of those domineering senses, to reject this wild infatuation and rest in the sublime and passionless repose of an ideal nature; but, on the other side, he found this fortress attacked by a powerful foe, a foe who scorned all obstacles, a foe who was ready and willing to break down every barrier, even at the expense of losing a limb in the realisation. It was a strange combat, a combat more common than one would imagine, but for that reason jealously kept secret. When poor humanity comes out of the conflict it comes out determined that none shall know of the warfare, whether there has been victory or defeat. But once freed, that soul never again doubts the doctrine of a dual life, that life which Christianity, with sublime insight, expresses in her creeds as the fight between good and evil, and which the heathen world ascribed to strife in a far-reaching pantheism.

But the material world rolls on its way heedless of

spiritual combats, and day and night monotonously succeed each other. Man, if he does not live by bread alone, cannot live without it, though he may crush down his emotions, and the mundane existence of labour, of coming and going, of meals and useless remarks, goes on like a treadmill in its ceaseless round.

Still, even in this material existence, Brice felt that something was wrong. His forehead burned, and, in spite of its being a warm day, he shivered as he entered the train, no longer doubting he really had a bad sore throat. Was he ill? Perhaps it was only the excitement he had gone through. Anyhow, when he got home, he would be sure to find the doctor there, for he came every evening to see his father; he might just ask him if there was something wrong.

He ought to go to Foy Lodge that evening and see Griselda, but the very idea made him feel wretched. He had told her of his expected return—that was due to her; but, when he saw her, how explain the true facts to her? how tell her that— Good God! he could not imagine himself doing it; and yet he had promised Magdalen to go back to her a free man. Should he write? How should he word such dishonourable conduct, how—?

When Brice stepped down from the train he found his sister waiting for him in the pony-carriage, and the matter-of-fact appearance of this lady was almost comforting to him in his present state of mind. She

was one of the human beings who prefer announcing disagreeable reports to saying agreeable things.

"It is time you came back," she said, handing Brice the reins. "Griselda Foy has been plunged in gaiety this week. Mrs. Foy is flattered by the notice her daughter has attracted. The Duchess of Blackwater has called on the Foys, and of course it was at her son's instigation. It is a pity you don't insist on making your engagement public."

For a moment it seemed to Brice that a door of escape was opened to him; then, suddenly thinking of Griselda, it was shut again. Whatever he might be, *she* was incapable of anything that was not true, as incapable as he would have believed himself to be six months ago.

"What nonsense!" he said impatiently.

"What's the matter with you, Brice? You look ill. I suppose Lady Mary has kept you hard at work with all her silly fads and fancies. Father seems worse, and mother is more anxious." Brice only replied with monosyllables, and when he reached home he found the doctor was upstairs, so solaced himself with a cigar till he came down. He felt much worse now, and a dim idea of something wrong took possession of him.

He had not to wait long before he heard Dr. Spenser's step. Brice asked him to come into the library.

"Glad to see you home. The Admiral wants

cheering up a little; not worse really, but—*you* don't look first-rate."

"That's what I wanted to ask you. It may be nothing, but I have a queer sort of feeling in my throat." The doctor examined it carefully, felt his pulse, went through the usual formalities of the profession.

"Look here, this is serious. Very sorry for you, but it's best you should know the truth at once. This looks to me like diphtheria. It may pass off, but you must go to bed and be isolated." Brice smiled, and lifted his eyebrows.

"Well, doctor, telegraph for a nurse. I mustn't give my sister any more trouble, or the old people needless anxiety. I'll retire into private life, that's all."

"Safest way; it may be nothing." The doctor went away, thinking in his own mind that Brice Leslie was a plucky fellow; the truth being that Brice was relieved by the feeling that, at all events, he could now put off the evil day. He could see no one—that was a fact he hailed with relief, even if the relief were attended with bodily pain.

Presently, however, the bodily overpowered the mental agony. There was sorrow and anxiety enough for his friends and relations. Griselda, who came every day to get news, became visibly thinner and paler, but she kept up bravely. She had her home duties to attend to, and she was not going to make

others as miserable as she was herself. Her mother needed much attention just then, and her father was worried about his wife. Griselda faced her duties like a brave woman, and no outsider would have given her credit for so much strength of character and such firm purpose as she now showed.

The days dragged heavily by, and it became generally known that Brice Leslie was very ill. Every day the doctor's reports were more gloomy, and Griselda's eyes grew larger; they had a scared look in them, as if something were going out of her life. Brice might not talk or write, she only had the daily news given to her in no comforting vocabulary by Miss Leslie, who one day remarked—

"Brice is worrying about something, the nurse says, something apparently about a promised visit to a Miss Cuthbert. She acted in that play. I dare say it is of no consequence, but if I knew her address I would write."

"I know her," said Griselda, "she is a great friend of Lady Mary Milton. I will get her address, and, by the way, papa and I are going to London the end of this week to see about a new governess for Evie—I will call on Miss Cuthbert. She will know what Brice means. Does he like my flowers and my notes?" she asked suddenly. "O Miss Leslie! it seems so dreadful not to see him—not to be able to do anything for him. But I mean to be brave; Brice will praise me some day when he hears of it, and when we talk over

this dreadful time." Griselda's eyes filled with tears, but with a strong effort she forced them back.

To herself she said, "I feel as if I would willingly take his place, even if I had to die."

CHAPTER XVII.

GRISELDA FOY stood by the old carved mantelpiece in the dining-room, waiting for her father to come down-stairs. She held a little note from Miss Leslie in her hand; it contained these words: "We are so glad you are kindly going to call at Miss Cuthbert s house. Brice is always repeating her name in his delirium, and there is evidently some promise weighing on his mind—so, at least, the nurse seems to think. You can imagine my trouble; I cannot leave my father, who is much worse because of his anxiety about Brice, and the doctor is fearful of infection. We send our love, and we know how you share our constant anxiety."

There was a change in Griselda. Any one with an attentive eye could have seen that, though it was hard to define where the change lay. The lithe girlish figure still looked full of health and life, the same sweet brave smile still lighted up the face when her own people spoke to her and required her help—and everybody did require Griselda's sunshine; but there was something in the expression of her eyes that was terribly pathetic. The pleading look of a deer, or that

possessed by some dogs, gives a faint idea of this new expression; the childlike gaze had entirely gone away. Just now, as she fingered the note and re-read the words, her pupils dilated, and she leant her graceful head against the carved work, dreamily reading over the words of the old motto again—

"*A Dieu Foy,*
Aux amis Foyer."

"Brice, Brice," she murmured, "'*A Dieu Foy*'; we looked at that together. I have not trusted enough; I never expected any trouble; everything was sunshine, and I thought it would always be so, and now—" Griselda paused, a dim thought, a vague anxiety, passed over her soul like a shadow over a deep pond—an anxiety which Griselda would not even put into words, so utterly startling and strange was it; but the letter in her hand had put it into her mind, and almost unconsciously she tore it into pieces and flung it into the paper-basket.

Then she brushed back her shining hair as if this action would drive away the ideas, and once more she traced out the motto with her rosy fingers.

So pure, so fresh, so graceful and lithe she looked, as she stood there, that one could easily imagine a barbarian falling down at her feet to worship this goddess come down among men. But the look of untroubled peace had fled, the merry joyous tones no longer sounded through the house: Griselda was learning by suffering.

At this moment she heard her father's step in the hall, and, hastily seizing a list of commissions given to her by her mother, she went out to meet him.

"Ready, my dear? That's right. Your mother seems better. Not much better news of poor Brice. Well, well, it's too early to despair."

Griselda suddenly laid her head upon her father's shoulder.

"Papa, life was so beautiful in New Zealand, and now—" She lifted her eyes and he saw the dazed look in them, it was as if the girl had looked at some horrible picture which had remained fixed on her mental vision.

"When Brice gets well, my dear, we will let everything become public; this concealment is rather trying for you."

"No, no, papa. Don't tell any one of—our engagement; it is much better as it is; this—this illness would be harder to bear, if everyone began to sympathise. Papa, I didn't mean to say anything—you know I did not, but just for a minute I forgot—I am so young and foolish, too young for Brice, I am afraid. But—he, he—" She paused, then, altering her tone, "Papa, he will get well, he cannot die, our motto helps me so much—

"'*A Dieu Foy,*
Aux amis Foyer.'

There would always be a home for Brice here, and love too, even if he did all sorts of odd things,

wouldn't there? I'm supposing such queer things, and I only mean that we Foys have always been true, haven't we? It's quite a fault with us."

Mr. Foy did not listen very attentively to all this; he knew Griselda was terribly anxious about her lover, he could see that in her face. He knew Brice was in great danger, but he made the best of it to his child. She meant, of course, if Brice died he must not force her to marry another; but time would settle all that—time, that softens so many things. At this moment, a day in London he thought would change her gloomy ideas.

"Yes, dear, we are an obstinate race. I believe there is no fear of a Foy giving up his faith or his friend. Now, come, we must not be late."

All the way to town Griselda held an envelope in her hand, on which Lady Mary had written Miss Cuthbert's address. Lady Mary had sent a kind letter to Griselda, saying she was extremely sorry to hear of Mr. Leslie's dangerous illness, and that if she, Griselda, happened to be near Wilton Crescent she was sure Miss Cuthbert would much like to hear all the latest particulars she knew about him. Lady Mary was prudent; she said no more, but she wondered if Griselda Foy would understand.

When their business was done, Griselda was ready with her request.

"Papa, I want to go and see Miss Cuthbert; I met her at Lady Mary Milton's, and——it won't interest

you to come. We can meet at the station; I will take a cab."

Mr. Foy was surprised, for it was very strange for Griselda to take a fancy for strangers; however, he was not a man to object.

"Very well. I'll go to my club and meet you again at Waterloo. Don't be late."

She smiled her answer, and half an hour later she was ringing the bell at Miss Cuthbert's house in Wilton Crescent. Griselda's heart beat fast, her colour came and went, her hand trembled; suppose Miss Cuthbert should not be there; suppose—

Miss Cuthbert was at home, and Griselda sent up her card, and was soon shown into a drawing-room with folding-doors thrown open. The room was empty, and Griselda sitting down with her back to the window had time to admire the exquisite taste of everything in it. It was not filled like a curiosity-shop with endless varieties of knicknacks, china of all dates, ornaments of no date, furniture of Queen Anne's time as imitated in the days of Queen Victoria; but there was a rich simplicity about everything, a unity of idea, a harmony of colour; there was what, for want of a better expression, we might call "a classic reserve" in everything. The books, too, indicated a taste both choice and wide, and the prints were rare. There were beautiful modern water-colours and one oil picture in a corner. Griselda could see it was good, though she

did not know enough to tell that it was a Guercino.

"This is exactly how a modern room ought to be furnished," thought Griselda, knowing it was right, though not knowing why. "It is just the house she ought to live in; everything is perfect, fit for her. No wonder—"

There was a long sweep of softest drapery, and Magdalen herself opened the door. Griselda noted that the owner of the house did indeed match the room; she had on an exquisite grey silk tea-gown which softened all that was hard in her face.

Griselda for a moment became conscious that she herself was dressed in a simple blue print, and that her gloves were soiled; then she forgot all these minor defects in sudden admiration of Magdalen. Her heart seemed to beat so violently that she could not speak at first, and there rose before her mind's eye the vision of the paper-basket where Miss Leslie's note lay torn into small pieces.

Then, looking up again quickly, the young girl noted a strange expression on Miss Cuthbert's face; she saw that she looked pale and worn, that her face had a thin, pinched look, and that her dazzling beauty seemed half veiled. Six months ago Griselda could not have told that these signs denoted mental suffering, now she immediately drew this conclusion—"Miss Cuthbert is anxious about something or somebody." Again her tongue seemed to be paralysed,

and it was without a word that she held out her hand.

"I did not expect to see you," said Magdalen quietly, though her tone expressed no surprise, "but perhaps you have come in by chance. Are you staying in London?"

"Oh no, no! I could not do that when—do you know?—Mr. Leslie is so dangerously ill—and—they let him see no one; diphtheria is so catching, and oh! it is such a terrible disease. Indeed, even if he gets better they will not let any one—not me even—see him for a long time."

Miss Cuthbert had looked at her with her wondrous strange blue eyes as she spoke, and then without saying a word seemed to motion her to sit down; but this time she, Magdalen, took her place with her back to the light and motioned Griselda to a chair opposite, where all the autumn glow fell on her face and made visible every varying expression. There was no need of such strong light, however, to see the alteration in the girl's face. What had been like a ray of pure sunshine seemed now touched with the cold finger of despair, lightly touched perhaps, but she had felt the first chill of it. Mechanically Magdalen repeated to herself, "She is a child, she would love anybody. She will forget him—just now, of course, she is troubled; but—"

"It is a dreadful thing," she said quietly, and her tone sounded strangely calm and cold when compared

with Griselda's accent of acute pain, "but you need not conclude that—the worst results will follow, Miss Foy."

Griselda leant her head on her hand, and this action, the action of an older person, gave something pathetic to the whole girlish figure. There was a pause—Griselda was evidently thinking deeply, and then rising quickly she made a few steps towards Magdalen; but the cold, immovable, imperturbable figure appeared to stop her, as if the elder woman's stronger will had bidden her not to approach her. Griselda sank down on her chair again.

"Please forgive me for being so—so stupid and restless. I don't know how I have got through this second week of it. I try never to remain idle for a moment; I dare not think. Miss Cuthbert, you know him, that is why I have come here—no—it was another reason as well." Griselda clasped her hands round her knees and bent forward a little, but that beautiful woman opposite to her remained cold and impassive; it seemed as if Griselda were talking to a person utterly indifferent to her words and her grief.

"Indeed—what other reason?"

"I knew you would like to hear about him—any one who knows Brice really, must care to hear—and besides—" The rest of the sentence seemed to stick in her throat; her lips refused to utter it.

"Besides?"

"Besides, he is always speaking about you, asking for you—"

Magdalen actually felt her colour rising, knew her hand trembled; only she pressed it firmly against her knee, and pretended to pick out a little loose thread from her gown.

"This is what is reported to you," she said, and laughed her short, strange laugh, "but as you have not seen him, most likely he merely mentioned my name once. The play probably stuck in his memory."

"That is true, it is only what they tell me." Then she put her hand wearily on her forehead, leaning her elbow on the Chippendale table. "No, they said something else—about some promise. I daresay you can explain."

"Explain the wanderings of fever; indeed, that is beyond my power, Miss Foy. You give me credit for more talent than falls to my share."

"Then is it nothing?—cannot you understand, cannot you send him a message that will—ease his mind, comfort him? People do understand—I've heard our doctor say it—even when they appear to be quite light-headed. If you were to say it was all right, or that you did not want to know any more, or anything, Brice might be comforted."

"It is very unlikely," said Magdalen slowly. "Had we not better let the doctor and the nurse manage their patient in their own way?"

"Oh!" gasped Griselda, "you do not know—you

cannot surely understand about—me—and him? I thought that night when we saw you near the fountain at Rosehill that you knew I was—that we were lovers. If not, I should not have dared to come here, just to—talk about him; but you, except our own people, are the only person who knows our secret, and—I—may I say it, Miss Cuthbert?—I couldn't help liking you the first time I saw you." Griselda blushed as she made this remark. There was something so trusting in her words, in her tone, that Magdalen in spite of herself was touched, although she argued proudly that the admiration of a girl so young and so simple was utterly valueless to her.

"It was very kind of you, Miss Foy," she said. Though the words sounded slightly ironical, Magdalen did not imagine for a moment that Griselda would hear or recognise her tone, but to her surprise she appeared to do so, for she lifted her eyes and looked at Magdalen reproachfully, though she said nothing about the irony.

"Don't call me Miss Foy. Everybody calls me Griselda. Near you I feel so young and so ignorant. You are so clever, and—I may say, mayn't I?—so beautiful, that I don't wonder everyone admires you. I should never have had the courage to come here, if—if—it hadn't been for Brice's sake. I wish I could explain myself about him. You don't know how much I love him; I can't explain it to myself even; it began when I was a child. He used to come and stay with

us for a few weeks at a time between his journeys into the interior; I think I learnt to know all his thoughts almost, and yet I remained just my stupid self as well. Is that foolish?"

Magdalen lay back in the arm-chair half wearily, as if all this *naïve* confession bored her slightly.

"Everybody is influenced in a different way, I believe."

"You can explain all that, I know, but I can't; I only know that I love him—that my feeling is quite apart from his—caring about me; that I think of his happiness before my own. Oh, I'm sure I do!"

"We are apt to think that till we are tried." Magdalen's tone was more interested now. This simple girl, after all, was not quite colourless, not merely an easily-influenced individual, who could be acted upon by any outside force stronger than herself. "But the truth is, our deepest feelings centre round an invariable nucleus of self."

"You say so, clever people say so, I suppose, but it isn't really always true; it isn't true with me. If it were to make Brice happy I would—" Griselda paused, and suddenly Magdalen lost the feeling that she was talking to a child, or that a child was talking to her; she bent forward and looked at her as if she would find the flaw in this young soul, which from its very purity and simplicity seemed so strong that Magdalen's passionate nature was touched, nay, even surprised out of herself.

"Yes, there is the test; in reality how little you would do! Would you—let me paint an imaginary picture—would you let another woman take his love from you? would you let her by the strength of her—passion—forgive me the word (you are almost too young to understand it)—turn his pure deep affection into a burdensome weight? would you allow her to crush his manhood till he gave up the struggle, and perhaps in the far future lived to repent? I have seen that done."

Griselda's soft rounded cheeks were covered with deep blushes, as Magdalen, in a quick passionate utterance, painted her picture. It was as if she had taken that girl's soul in her hands and forced it to bear the pressure of suffering humanity, but in the process the innate purity of Griselda's being felt the scorching, blasting power of the world's cruelty.

"Yes, I would," she said quietly, though as she spoke the tears fell slowly down her cheek. "I love him so much that I would give up everything for him, and I should feel that in doing this I should still keep the best part of him, the part that trusted me and believed I would do everything for his happiness and not for my own."

There was a pause and a deep silence, a silence that seemed more terrible than the most awful storm. The old square highly-chased clock on the chimney-piece ticked aloud, marking time that was flying in its inexorable, invariable, proportion. Magdalen looked at the girl before her, and a strange new feeling of sur-

prise came over her. It was something new, something she could not fathom, something which—with her many-sided character, where self was the centre facet of every rose—she had not before believed possible; even now she doubted, doubted because doubt was so easy to her, because, much as she believed in abstract generosity, abstract nobility, abstract self-renunciation, she was utterly sceptical about the reality of them in the conduct of woman or of man. She had the feeling expressed by Satan in the poem of Job: "Doth Job fear God for nought? . . but put forth Thine hand now, and touch all that he hath, and he will curse Thee to Thy face." Either Griselda Foy did not love Brice, as Magdalen understood love, or she herself was incapable of understanding this creed —an emblem, if true, of God-like unselfishness. But if she, Magdalen, were wrong? If—the very thought humbled her, but she was not conquered yet, not convinced, for doubt is as strong as faith; if the latter works miracles, the former will destroy strong and apparently impregnable fortresses. Magdalen heaved a little sigh; it came from the depth of a heart that had been wounded in many a fight, that had striven in vain to find peace, and that now, on the threshold of so-called happiness, was stopped by an obstruction so slight, so despised, that she looked down upon it in mute surprise.

Suddenly she rose from her chair and stood up before Griselda in all her womanly beauty. Everything

about her was made to dazzle; she delighted in the sight of it herself, and not only for the effect it might have on others. If she were made up of powerful contradictions, she was, through the same contradictions, capable of surprising herself and others. Griselda also stood up, she felt time was slipping away, she must not miss her train; but she had not yet accomplished her purpose.

"I must go now," she said simply, so simply that it seemed impossible to believe she had spoken just now above herself, above poor human nature; "but we were forgetting, Miss Cuthbert—I came here to get a message for Brice. It may be just what he wants to—to ease his mind."

Magdalen came close to Griselda; tall as was this latter, Magdalen was a little taller, and not slight nor lithe. In that moment of contact, when Magdalen's soft silk touched with lightest rustle Griselda's blue cotton, there came over the elder woman, the woman of the world, a feeling belonging as it seemed to some former state of existence perhaps, some former consciousness of other worlds where she had been a mother, where a child's innocent lips had touched hers, and a child's fair curls had lain on her bosom. Without a word she put her strong arm round Griselda, and drew down the girl's head on her shoulder. "Poor child," she said softly, "you love him very much, you will make him happy, you must." Griselda's self-control almost gave way, there was a little sob heard mingling

with the ticking of the clock. "I—I would give my life for his."

"Hush, child, you need not do that—believe me—you will be happy yet. He will get well; Griselda, kiss me, child; I think that—I—who believe in so little, I must believe in you. Now go—I will send Mr. Leslie a message—soon."

With a little cry of happiness Griselda flung her arms round Magdalen's neck. "I love you, Miss Cuthbert—always—whatever you do, because—" No, that sentence could not be, never was finished.

An hour later Magdalen still sat there like some sphinx of the desert, some grand unearthly Greek goddess. Her bosom heaved as if life were slowly ebbing away, as if she had detached herself from all that was human, all that made life worth having; she seemed to be looking into the future as she gazed fixedly into vacancy; dim spectres seemed to come and go before her, strange shapes conjured up from past dreams of youthful delight; she felt this whole world of spirits was fighting against her and she against them; and, more distinct than any of them, rose the image of Brice Leslie—but Brice Leslie in the future, the man who might some day reproach her for that which he now craved for; then, in a golden background of pure light, Griselda appeared, and at the end of all Magdalen rose and lifted her arms high above her and clasped them over her head. "She loves," she said, "but perhaps I have never loved before. Suppose I—I—— Is it possible?"

CHAPTER XVIII.

This evening Magdalen could not think uninterruptedly about herself; that was doubtless a blessing, a great blessing in her present frame of mind. Mrs. Stewart was ill and was a little exacting about attention and attentions. Miss Cuthbert was not a good nurse; she had always enjoyed splendid health, and looked upon the many weak beings of the world with a sort of dumb pity which was not at all akin to love. She had very right ideas about health, thinking it was a greater title of honour than nervous or sentimental weakness; but when she set herself to nurse Mrs. Stewart, she did it with all her might. Thoroughness had a charm for Magdalen, that is, as long as the inclination to do the thing lasted.

Her old friend's bell made her suddenly remember her long absence from her bedside, and she walked to the glass and rearranged her hair; this little touch of vanity was very characteristic of Magdalen. She would not have liked even Mrs. Stewart to have seen an unlovely line about her; it was this fastidiousness about her appearance that had led spiteful tongues—especially women's tongues—to say that Miss Cuthbert was always posing; to such an accusation Lady Mary

had once answered, "Oh, there is posing and posing. Magdalen's posing is born of a fine sense of fitness and artistic feeling; in that sense everyone *ought* to pose, it is their duty." Whereupon a plain spinster had answered that Lady Mary would be sure to defend all Miss Cuthbert's actions, even if she committed murder. "Well, of course," answered the incorrigible champion, "if she committed a murder, it would be a fine crime, there would be something worth studying in the details." What is the use of arguing with an advocate who is not ashamed to bring forward such a defence?

"What a long visit some one paid you, Magdalen! I want my tea. Did they stay all that time?" said Mrs. Stewart.

"No, dear, I am sorry; I have been—dreaming of plans—and I forgot everything else."

"That is very unlike you; I have noticed a change in you lately, let me look at you."

"I don't think my health need make any one anxious," said Magdalen, laughing.

"But you trifle with it dreadfully, sooner or later you must pay for such imprudence."

Mrs. Stewart was always happy when she was slightly indisposed, and happier if she could make herself believe that Magdalen had a mysterious malady which, though it gave no outward sign whatever, would, like a so-called extinct volcano, some day burst forth when least expected.

"I am well, quite well; I will give you full warning when I feel a serious illness approaching." Magdalen rang the bell for tea, then sat down by the invalid's sofa. She was still absent-minded, however, but she took up a piece of silk embroidery and stitched diligently to hide her strange silence. At last, forcing herself to speak, she added—

"It was Miss Foy who came; I told you about her. She is the girl who was thrown from her horse and was brought in to Rosehill by Mr. Leslie. It was quite a romantic little episode."

"Why did she come?"

"Oh, well, she admires me, I think, but she is almost a child; one half expects to see her in short frocks. However, she is pretty, very pretty. She made quite a sensation at Lady Mary's party."

"It is all through me that you have come back to this dull place, dear Magdalen. You have so many invitations, won't you accept one of them and leave me?"

Mrs. Stewart only half meant her unselfish speech, but in that she resembled many another speaker.

"No, indeed, I really like it. London has a strange fascination for me now that one meets no one. It seems to make life a little more real; but I was going to say, dear, that I want to go and spend a day in the country soon, not far off, in Lady Mary's neighbourhood. I can come back in the evening, or at least the next morning, as I may sleep at Rosehill.

You won't mind? Andrews will look after you, I know, better than I can do."

"You have been very good to me, Magdalen; I wish—yes, with all my heart, that you could make up you mind to—give some one else the right to—to love you."

Magdalen frowned. Mrs. Stewart must indeed be presuming on her indisposition to dare to say this to her.

"We agreed long ago to respect each other's private affairs," she said, a little haughtily. Then a maid came in with a dainty tea-service, and that happy meal brought another turn to the dangerous conversation.

When she retired to her room that evening, and after her beautiful hair had been brushed, Magdalen dismissed her maid, saying she wanted nothing more; then a very strange thing took place. She went to her wardrobe and looked over a somewhat large assortment of dresses and mantles, and choosing the simplest black silk skirt she could find she put it on and dressed herself entirely as if she were going out of doors. She even put on her hat and the simple cloak adorned with soft real lace. The hat, though of plain black straw, was perfect in shape and trimmed with handsome black ostrich feathers; when fully dressed, she lighted two more wax candles, and by the increased light examined herself attentively in the glass. She had no ornaments except one simple crystal locket set round with diamonds. The locket

was meant to contain hair, but it had nothing in it now. Evidently the effect was satisfactory, for Magdalen smiled with pleasure and then laughed a little ironically at herself for being able to care. This done she took off the out-door garments, wrapped herself in a dressing-gown and walked slowly up and down the room.

"I *must* go to-morrow," she said at last, aloud, "I *must*. My courage will only hold out just long enough; who knows even if it will hold out as long as that! Is it really I who am going to do this? I can't believe it—and afterwards? Afterwards? afterwards—is there any afterwards? What is it that splendid dreamer, Leconte de Lisle, says?" She paused before a bookshelf of foreign books and took down a volume of poems, entitled *Poèmes Tragiques;* her long supple fingers turned its pages swiftly over till she found the verse she remembered, under the title of "L'Illusion suprême":

> "Tout cela Jeunesse, amour, joie et pensée,
> Chante de la mer et les forêts, souffle du ciel;
> Emportant à plein vol l'espérance insensée,
> Qu'est-ce que tout cela, qui n'est pas éternel?"

She put back the volume and took down another —evidently this poet was a favourite of hers, and the next lines she found had previously been marked:

> "Et toi, divine Mort, où tout rentre et s'efface,
> Accueille tes enfants dans ton sein étoilé;
> Affranchis-nous du temps, du nombre et de l'espace,
> Et rends-nous le repos que la vie a troublé."

"He believes in a happy previous state of existence as well as in the after Nîrvana," she said to herself, "and I—I—don't know what to believe! But the present, the present is one's own; at all events, one can act in this life."

Then the image of Griselda Foy forced itself again on her mind. "How simple she is, and yet she is such a riddle. I believe she spoke the truth. Can I believe *that?* Yes, I do, I do—I *will* not doubt it. Once, when I first knew Percy, I too—no, I was never like that, but I too could believe as she does. But then to have felt faith in man, in God, in everything slipping away, loosening itself insensibly from one's grasp, one's heart, one's brain—that was dreadful, but was it worse than this?"

Magdalen put back her poet on the shelf and went to open her window. It was chilly now, the night was cold, and she shivered. The strength of her fierce struggles had exhausted her, and soon closing the window she went to bed. As she lay there in the darkness some old familiar words floated through her brain; it was long since she had thought of them or used them, but now they seemed to come unbidden to her memory: "I will arise, and go to my Father."—"No," she said aloud, "no, to—to—Brice! O Brice! is it because I love you, or because I think I love you?"

Then very soon a soft unconsciousness drew a merciful veil over her brain, and in spite of all anxiety Magdalen Cuthbert fell fast asleep.

A good many miles away from Wilton Crescent there was another watcher, another whose physical weakness at times clouded his intellect and at times abnormally sharpened his perceptions, till the keen vibrations of thought caused a new agony never before experienced by the sick man. Brice Leslie could, at times, see and rehearse the past so plainly, that it seemed to him impossible to believe that he was not in truth reacting it. The human brain is so delicately balanced that one is tempted to imagine that a perfectly sane, well-balanced cellular brain department must belong only to a very few of the human race. Sometimes one is even inclined to think that any great talent, any great emotion, any trace of genius, is the result of some derangement of the brain cellules, some dimly explained or unexplainable disturbance of the grey matter, where scientific philosophers lodge our intellectual activity and our active emotions. This idea helps one to realise the repugnance with which some natures view all passion, all that passes the boundary of the ordinary. There may be, in fact, as direct a satisfaction in contemplating the commonplace as there is in looking at a person in rude health, a feeling which can hardly be explained to any one who, on the contrary, craves for what is extraordinary and unbalanced. The first could echo the words of the French poet—

> "Je haïs la passion et l'esprit me fait mal
> Aimons-nous doucement."

The other, in his lassitude of all emotions and finding none that could sufficiently move him, could exclaim, with another famous Frenchman—

"Je suis venu trop tard dans un monde trop vieux."

Strangely enough, Brice Leslie, as he lay on his sick-bed, left from unavoidable circumstances entirely alone, except for his professional nurse—a woman whose excellent training had taken away all her natural art of nursing and sympathy—was pursued alternately by these two extremes. Sometimes he looked back with intense longing to the mental calm of his New Zealand life, to the happy, almost unemotional, experience during the long growth of his love for Griselda Foy. At other times all these thoughts were hurled away in a mad tumult of passionate regrets, passionate longings for the sight of Magdalen. Then, too, he experienced a deep anguish that he had not cast all consideration to the winds, and that he had not taken advantage of the present, the time when, in a supremely happy moment for him, she had said, looking at him, with those deep blue eyes, where happiness seemed to be rekindled from long-smouldering ashes, "Forgive me, Brice."

Then the passionate longing would at times suddenly cool down. Any long strain of emotional thought is apt to extinguish its own fire, and requires a new energy to rekindle it, obeying some hidden law, some unknown boundaries which have been set to

human sensations in order to protect them from themselves. At such moments Brice felt distinctly that he did not wish to see Magdalen Cuthbert again, that she had cast over him a spell against which his higher nature rebelled, a nature which in him would surely reassert itself. If she prevailed, blight would inevitably follow, the blight of all strong purpose, the blight of all high ideals, whether of religious, physical, or intellectual work, without which a man cannot live, though a woman may be able to exist. Man cannot sustain his mental energy by love alone; the very durability of his race demands more from him, and by a saddened satiety provides the antidote against a moral decadence. But these thoughts, though true and founded on an innate creed, were succeeded by others, and in these he accused himself of being untrue to every high ideal and honourable feeling. He despised himself for being false, yet at the same time knowing he was incapable of determining his future course of action. After this came a period of still more severe bodily suffering, causing a partial cessation of brain activity. In his unconscious moments he felt himself pursued by the one idea of wishing to see Magdalen, of wishing to fulfil his promise to come back to her; whilst, in his periods of perfect consciousness, he experienced an intense feeling of quiet peace when Griselda's little notes of friendship (as the nurse read them aloud to him, Griselda could say very little but the kind commonplace) were daily brought

into his room. At first he had turned his head toward the door every time it opened, expecting a letter from Magdalen, some line of sympathy, some words beneath which he could read love; but then he had argued that of course this was impossible for her, it would be too dangerous. After settling this Brice relapsed into varying feelings, among which was one of suppressed rage at the illness itself. This time of waiting, of uncertainty, was what he had never foreseen, and brave as he was outwardly, never letting a murmur escape him, he was prolonging his pain and increasing his danger by his mental anxiety.

His father's illness was at this time increased by the anxiety he felt for his son, and Mrs. Leslie and her daughter were kept in close attendance on the chronic invalid. Infection was of course much dreaded; neighbours would not approach the house, and Griselda's daily note was sent by post. Lady Mary also wrote occasionally to inquire, and passed on the answer to Magdalen. The former felt very unhappy that the engagement had not been a certain fact, but she comforted herself with the idea that a dangerous illness adds ten per cent. to the interest a woman feels for a man who loves her. Brice Leslie was bound to marry Magdalen, and she on her side would still further have her liking turned into pity, her pity into love. Lady Mary always argued neatly; her talents included the talent of seeing a proper fitness and a sequence of events with a strange clearness

of insight, and her prophecies, when communicated to others in concise language, much helped to bring about their own fulfilment.

Brice's bedroom looked out upon a picturesque lane branching off from the main road, a lane seldom used except by the drivers of country carts or the clergyman's pony-carriage, occasionally driven down that side to reach an out-of-the-way hamlet. The house was old-fashioned and many-gabled, faced with rough weather-tiles; there was a large flower and kitchen garden at the back, whilst in front one could see the blue distance through the overbranching trees of the country lane.

There was a peacefulness about the place which was very charming to weary folk, very soothing to overwrought nerves. Even Miss Leslie's commonplace remarks harmonised with the stillness; there was no fear of any outburst of mental energy on her part as she went about her daily duties and of the servant's delinquencies made mountains out of molehills. She felt that it was very tiresome to have a nurse in the house—nurses were always so upsetting and required so much waiting upon; then Brice having contracted this infectious malady was the crown of all misfortune. She was one of those poor souls who trifle away happiness with trifling miseries, till it must be supposed that their misery becomes a pleasure, and that they will accept even the perfections of heaven with a sigh.

Miss Leslie was of course methodical. Every day after luncheon she took a constitutional walk, usually to some cottages; for visiting the poor was one of the few excitements she allowed herself—an excitement she could all the more enjoy, because it gave her the opportunity to deplore the thriftless ways of her neighbours. She always started at two o'clock, and came back at four. At half past four she rang the bell for tea, after this she read aloud to her parents if they wished it, or she wrote the family letters. There is more pleasure than many persons understand in daily monotony, and certainly Miss Leslie enjoyed it to the full.

And now the most anxious period of Brice's illness had passed. He was still very ill, very weak, and the doctor said, highly infectious; but there was now hope he would pull through, if, that is, he did not have a relapse. Perfect quiet was ordered, and the nurse was a great martinet. Miss Leslie sometimes walked as far as Foy Lodge, and on these occasions she felt that it was a very unfortunate thing for Brice to be engaged to such a young girl as Griselda. Suppose she had been already his wife, what could she have known about nursing? In fact, she disapproved of the whole business, adding to her other shortcomings a disbelief in the capabilities of young people.

The October sun was sinking one day when Miss Leslie, having been delayed by her father's indisposition, started off with her mother for a late constitu-

tional drive. Brice was decidedly better, though dreadfully weak, but he was able to be left alone for a short time—indeed he said he preferred it; so the nurse was asked, and somewhat ungraciously agreed to sit with Mr. Leslie whilst his wife and daughter went for a very necessary change of air. They meant to drive to Foy Lodge, and as the carriage passed up the lane and emerged into the high road they saw a fly stop at the village inn, and a lady step out of it. Miss Leslie pointed her out to her mother, and as they both made much of any small event, wondered what elegant stranger could be putting up at such a humble place as "The Wyvern."

"It is rather late, too," said Miss Leslie; "perhaps it is merely a visitor to the Vicarage; their stable only takes in the pony carriage." This subject sufficed the two ladies for half an hour's conversation, so, without noticing it they passed the exquisite fir-wood, where the low slanting sunlight struck the red stems and turned them into a quivering blaze of apricot-red. Then as they drove over one of the bridges of the canal, they did not even heed how the sunlight mirrored the surface of the water with glories which no painter could reproduce.

But all this intense beauty was not thrown away on the stranger who—having told the flyman to wait at the "Wyvern" till her return—walked down the hill towards Gable End. Woman of the world she might be, and with many powers dwarfed for want

of using them—devoid, too, of that religious enthusiasm which, capable of elevating the human mind above itself, defies the lower nature to do its worst. In spite of this, Magdalen Cuthbert still possessed a poet's soul, and who shall positively deny that this did not replace in her much of that which Miss Leslie would have thought far more important?

On the crest of the slight rising, from which one could see the chimneys of Gable End, she paused and looked around her. No one was in sight; she was alone with Nature. On her right she saw the fields of richest colouring; the dividing hedges of golden autumn tints mingling with darkest green; waves of varying colour, over which the eye travelled with the same pleasure which the body experiences when carried over the swelling waves. In the deep blue distance rose a beautiful hill, round which the sky-line appeared to pencil a lighter halo of gold, a hill whose outline was made irregular by a thick crown of fir-trees, which recalled with their separated pinnacles the law of the lost and found.

Over all this the October sun was slowly sinking towards its bed of purple clouds, spread ready to receive it before the glory should disappear.

On the other side, the scene was less suggestive of field-labour. The country here consisted of pure heather land; the hills were diversified by threads of sandy roads, bordered by pines, whilst here and there larches and oak-trees made sharp contrasts with the

firs. Nearer still was the village church, of no particular architecture and surmounted with an open turret, within which the one bell could be clearly seen; but, to make up for its poverty of outline, God's Acre, full of graves, lay all around. It had been made out of barely-reclaimed heather land, where Nature reasserted itself and sowed its heath flowers, its dwarf gorse, its purple rattle, its toad flax, and its hundred other minute blossoms to ornament the nameless mounds of the poor, or to add greater glory to the headstones of the rich.

Magdalen looked at all this as if she were in a dream. Somehow, she could not realise life; she felt as if she herself were unreal, and that even the beauty about her was more like a vision than a reality. She could not analyse it, but in her present mood it seemed to give her that extraordinary sympathy some minds experience when face to face with inanimate nature; a sympathy which is so mysterious that no philosopher has attempted to explain it, nor indeed to be certain of its reality.

There was no one in sight, no possible witness to her actions, no reason to pose, no man or woman present to admire her. The intense stillness was almost irritating in its calmness; it did not, however, help her to see anything calmly; on the contrary, it added to her emotion and to her uncertainty. It made her feel that life was a mistake, that her life had been a failure, and that now by her own act she was going to

deprive the future of hope, and make it as gloomy as the past. There would be nothing to look forward to, not even the calm impassibility of nature, nor its freedom from thought or feeling. Was anything worth troubling oneself about? was there such a thing as right and wrong, as good or evil? was it not all abstract feeling decided and crystallised by men, but as varying as the shapes of crystallised particles? At one time the race believed in one shape, at another in its opposite; but the thing itself was incapable of discovery, and after all, perhaps, not worth discovering.

Such were Magdalen's thoughts for a moment, as she stood there on the crest of the hill and heaved a deep sigh which brought her no relief. Then with the suddenness of man's—or shall we say woman's—varying thought, her wavering feelings were in a moment transformed into certainty.

"If there is a higher Power, if we are not merely cast here to wander on where our disposition leads us, then there may be some good in this,—then I may make up for something else, that is if the whole idea of making up is tenable. There must be such a Power, even though veiled in mystery; there must be —there must be. If there is, then God help me to believe in it, and in Him."

She was once more the Magdalen Cuthbert, who in early youth had entered bravely into life's arena, meaning to come out of it with a patent of nobility;

she was once more the true, unselfish woman she had felt herself capable of being—oh, so long ago it seemed!—so long ago. Her lips relaxed, her eyes lost their hard look, her slight frown gradually disappeared. As long as life lasts there is always a power of rising (though there are some who disbelieve this creed), there is always some spark that can be rekindled, if not kept alight, and there is always power to bring forth the unexpected.

She woke up from her trance and forced herself to think of the present and of the reason which had brought her here. She also had noticed the two ladies, and the landlord of the inn had pointed them out to her and named them, for she had just inquired where the Leslies lived. He had offered to stop them for her, but she had refused imperatively, secretly delighted that so far chance had helped her. Now she walked down the lane till she came to the swing-gate that led up to the front door of Gable End. Magdalen paused; she had left everything to chance, and now she seemed unable to settle what to say, if she did go up and ring the bell; so she walked slowly down the road looking at the house over the palisade, which was edged with low laurels. Her quick glance took in more than the deliberate gaze of most people; she saw that the window beneath the front gable was only opened a little at the top and bottom, that the blind was half-drawn down, and that a small vase of flowers had been placed on the window-sill. That

must be the sick-room, she decided; the scent of hot-house flowers had been too strong for the invalid and the nurse had placed them outside.

But how was she to get a sight of Brice, how speak to him? She had pondered over this without arriving at any solution. The danger of infection would cause everyone to be denied an entrance, but Magdalen had determined that she would see Brice, that she would speak to him if only for a minute.

Now, without further waiting, she gently pushed open the gate, and, not letting it swing back, she walked noiselessly up the path. The bright sunlight burst forth at this moment and was as quickly over-shadowed by a passing cloud. Suddenly, Magdalen's doubts and hesitation were dispelled, for she found the front door standing open, and her mind was at once made up. Leaving her sunshade in a corner of the hall, she walked quickly upstairs. There were no maids about; she saw the dining-room door standing wide open, and from a distant region came sounds of tea-cups; so, most likely, some of the maids were having their early tea. At the top of the stairs Magdalen paused to consider which could be Brice's room; in another moment she had decided. But now she heard close beside her a door creak on its hinges. Another instant and she walked towards an angle and placed herself behind it, and from this hiding-place she saw the nurse in her uniform walk down-stairs holding a tray in her hand. She had not come out of

the room which Magdalen had already settled was Brice's sick-chamber. Was she then mistaken? Perhaps so, but she would make sure. She heard the baize door below swing back, and in the short interval came the sound of female voices, undoubtedly belonging to servants who feel free of the ears of a strict mistress.

Magdalen walked straight to the room of the gable window and opened it softly. The first glance assured her she was right; she was in a sick-room, and in Brice's sick-room. There were no curtains to his bed, and he lay there with closed eyes, and so pale and gaunt-looking as to be barely recognisable. He must have been very near death's door; was he already entering it? A great pity awoke in Magdalen's heart, a love for the strong man brought low, which for the instant had a real touch of the motherly instinct.

She closed the door noiselessly, and walked a few steps forward. Her heart beat fast; she was doing an unheard-of thing, and at any moment she might be discovered. What would Brice himself think of her? what would he say to her?

She paused a few feet away from the bed, and Brice, fancying the nurse had returned, opened his eyes; then, as in one of his feverish dreams, his glance met that of Magdalen's blue eyes. There she stood—dressed in soft clinging black—with a feathered hat he had seen at Rosehill, that softened away

the harder outlines; and as he looked, never doubting for a moment that his brain was playing him this trick, he saw her lips part, he saw the living colour spread over her cheeks, and the smile that had often turned his head break forth. He started up, and in his poor, weak, altered voice he called her—"Magdalen!"

"Hush!" she said gently, and with a cadence of tone that he had never heard before, so that he thought Dante's Beatrice could never have been half so beautiful,—"Hush, Brice, I have come to see you for a moment only—to—to—" She could not say the word yet, it seemed to stick in her throat, to force itself back.

"Is it true?" he said, in his hoarse whisper; "is it you, you yourself?" Then, partly realising the truth, with his thin, transparent hand he feebly waved her away—

"For God's sake, Magdalen—for God's sake, do not come near me; there is still infection—you may be in danger."

"I am not afraid; do not agitate yourself—see, I have no fears." She came close to him and took his hand. The effort he had made was all he was equal to, his eyes now looked up only in mute appeal.

"Magdalen," he repeated softly, but the word was only just audible.

"Do not speak," she said, stooping a little so that her face seemed to him like a saint's head appearing

above him; "you have been very ill—but you are better now; Lady Mary sent me word that you were. I am glad, so very glad. You will get well—and you will forget me."

He lifted his eyes mutely to hers; the pathos of the look brought tears into her blue eyes, as his lips tried to frame her name again.

"Yes, you will get well and you will be happy. I have seen your Griselda—Brice; don't turn away, but listen to me. I have so few minutes—I ought not to be here—what will they say to me? I have never spoken like this before to mortal man or woman, I never shall again. It has all been a mistake, but—it was my fault partly; I played with fire, and then I cried when it burnt me. Brice, can you understand? I loved you first for having been good to Percy, for being such a true friend, and then because of—myself. I was so proud to have won a noble heart—and then—when I knew— No, I don't blame you; I see it all, I would not draw back. I am so vain, so proud, I would not draw back. But since then I have seen Griselda, I have thought it all out. She is good, so good that she will make you happy—because she is unselfish. And we—you and I, Brice—it might have been all a mistake. You would have got over the fancy; and I—I must have disappointed you—I know I should; we might even have got tired of each other, and I should have heard you reproach me. O Brice! I am so proud, so proud, I don't know what I

should have done. Sometimes I doubt everything—I doubt if I can love."

She had spoken very quickly, very hurriedly, she hardly knew if she were saying what she meant to say; she had rehearsed it mentally several times, but those words were not forthcoming—these did not express all she meant to say, but they were the first that her lips could frame. With another man, or with a man in strong health, the old Magdalen might have reappeared; she might have been cold or wayward or haughty, and she might have waited for the worship she expected; but all this was gone, and little as she guessed it she was a woman now, a woman who could have retained love as well as evoked it. If this mood could have lasted—if—

"Magdalen, you are a noble woman, you must despise me," he said, trying to speak plainly.

She shook her head. "How can I despise any one? Listen, Brice, in my heart I believe—yes, I do believe, that I am still true to Percy—as you were."

A light came into the sick man's eyes. He could not take his eyes from the beautiful face near to him.

"Then I may speak now—you would not let me before. His last words were of you. 'If I could see her,' he said, 'she would forgive—she would pity me too much to turn away from me.'"

Magdalen's eyes filled with tears. She seemed so much to want pity herself now; she wanted love so much, so much, and she was giving it up. Percy had

lived to want it too—to want *her* love. She loosed Brice's hand and clasped hers together, suffering a silent concentrated pain which she could have explained to no one and which none could have understood.

Yes, Brice might have done so because he loved her, but he was too weak to think out any great thought. He knew that she was by his side, the rest he would remember afterwards.

At that moment Magdalen was recalled to the present by the sound of an opening door; she had stayed too long already, she must go. She stooped down and put her hand again on Brice's thin fingers; they were burning hot now, perhaps she had done him harm.

"Thank you, Brice, for telling me. I must go, I have made you worse. There—good-bye—some day you will thank me."

"No—no." He tried to shake his head, tried to clasp her cool hand. "Stay."

"No, but, Brice—I came to say good-bye. Some day, years hence, when there is no more pain, you will like to think that—I loved you."

Before he could stop her—for just then the terrible fear for her safety again swept over him—she stooped down and kissed him.

"Good-bye, Brice, you will be happy—you are the only man I have kissed, except Percy and my father."

"The danger," he murmured, trying to raise her hand to his lips. "Go, for God's sake, Magdalen, go."

She stooped again and smoothed his hair, as she answered with the sad, pathetic little laugh of old—

"The danger—I know it—I—I—— Good-bye, Brice, if I might, I would say, God bless you."

There was no time for more; a distant footstep was really audible as Magdalen moved away. She did not look back, but before Brice could do more than try to raise himself—try to call her once more "Magdalen"—she was gone, and the door was softly shut. When the nurse came in she found that her patient, whom she had left so convalescent, had fainted away.

CHAPTER XIX.

On this very evening Lady Mary sat in her drawing-room, talking over plans with her husband. It was only a fortnight since the place had been so lively, and since all the world had praised her and her unique entertainment. She was reaping her reward, and so was Frank; only, in his case, the reward was not much appreciated. There were invitations everywhere and from everybody, on Lady Mary's table; there were letters from the most fashionable people, and lying about Frank Milton's studio were humble petitions for portraits by his hand.

"We shall have to go back to it all," said Lady Mary, warming her feet at the fire, for it was a chilly evening and a tiny fire made the gathering darkness pleasant by contrast; "but this fortnight has been very pleasant, hasn't it, Frank? this solitude in the country?"

"Yes; only it is too good to last, Polly," he said; then, with an unusual exhibition of sentiment, he went to the back of his wife's chair and stroked her gold-shaded-hair; "but I fancy we might say that of heaven, and some people I could name would get

weary of what they call 'nice solitude in the country,' for instance."

"That's too bad, Frank; you know I'm not tired of your society, sir, especially when you are in a good humour, and don't abuse my friends."

"What friends, Lady Mary?"

"Why, Magdalen Cuthbert, of course. I am longing to proclaim to the world that 'Marmaduke' and 'Esther' are really wedded, and that they will be happy ever after—as happy as we are. Eh, sir, what do you say to that?" and Lady Mary put her hand up behind her head and found it, as she expected, clasped in Frank's hearty honest fist.

"My dear child, you and I differ on that subject. If you took a true view of that lady you would know she was a woman without a heart, who lives on admiration she does not even care to possess. You forget what I can remember, there was—"

"Pray don't, Frank; I know exactly what you are going to say, and you know what I shall answer. In spite of the past Magdalen is—"

The door was flung open, the footman stood in the doorway with the look of a Jack-in-the-box just emerged from its prison.

"Miss Cuthbert, my lady; she would like to speak to you in the hall."

The coincidence made Frank feel dreadfully guilty, as if both the footman and Magdalen had personally overheard him, whilst Lady Mary, knowing that she at

least was a true friend, hurried into the hall where Miss Cuthbert stood in the twilight looking like some black-robed representation of night.

"My dear Magdalen, why do you stay here? Where have you come from? Why didn't you tell me? Is anything the matter? I did not hear you drive up. Why, in a fly, too?"

"Don't kiss me," said Magdalen, in such a soft tone that Lady Mary hardly recognised it as hers. She put her gently away. "You had better not, though it is not infectious except from contact."

"What nonsense! what is it? Has Mrs. Stewart had smallpox?"

"No, no; but will you take me in for one night, after you know that I have been with some one who has or has had diphtheria?"

"Oh, my dear!" said Lady Mary, in a suppressed state of excitement—"yes, of course, you can stay here. It's all right, I'll give orders. I'm not afraid in the least; but, no, I won't ask you any more questions till after dinner. You are just in time."

Such a warm welcome as this seemed to restore a little of Magdalen's powers of feeling. All through that long, long drive she had felt as if transformed into stone; besides, she was very weary, very sick at heart.

"If you are a good Samaritan you will let me go to bed and send me a mouthful of something upstairs. I am very tired, and I think I have a headache, or what people call a headache."

"Of course, anything you like, my dear Magdalen. Is Mrs. Stewart better?"

"Yes, but far from well; I must go back to-morrow early, but to-night—well, I wanted just the quiet you will give me."

The two women went upstairs together, and the household in general saw little of Miss Cuthbert either that evening or the next morning. Lady Mary was somewhat silent and absent during this time, and Frank, believing the Magdalen had come for another indefinite stay, suddenly departed to his studio. He was wrong in this small particular, however, but the mistake was of no account in comparison with his grand triumph. The moment of it came next day when his wife was again sitting in the twilight with him, for the artist enjoyed blindman's holiday time.

"Frank," she began, but her lord and master was trying to draw a charcoal head, after the manner of the impressionists, and answered at cross-purposes.

"You don't need light," he said, when he took up his block, "for this sort of thing, and the less you look at your strokes the more they will look like the real thing."

"Well, I like the impressionist school; don't abuse them, they make you think of something below the surface; but, Frank—"

"Really, Mary, to look at Helmont's portrait of Miss Dorant is an insult to art."

"Do leave the impressionists, Frank, and listen to me; I suppose I must tell you some time or other."

"Eh, what?"

"Well, about Magdalen. I was *nearly* right."

Frank's interest was roused at once by the word *nearly*, and he laughed heartily.

"Oh, well, it's only nearly, is it? Let's hear the news, my dear Mary; so it wasn't *quite* so certain as you fancied."

"Oh, yes, it was. Frank, you needn't laugh. I've been puzzling my brains about it ever since dear Magdalen went away."

"I think I can relieve your mind without your puzzling about it. Leslie wasn't such a fool as to make the offer."

Lady Mary's face brightened.

"But he did—at least I believe he did; so there you are wrong."

"Or, if he did, I was going to say, she didn't—"

"That you can't tell; indeed, I believe she did, and that—"

"But the truth is—"

"That Brice Leslie did make the offer, and she refused him."

"What! Since his illness, or before?"

"Oh, that doesn't matter—she has refused him, so I suppose you will always think you were right."

"There was no thinking necessary. I was certain she would jilt him, as she did those other poor

fellows. I'm sorry we put him in the way of seeing her."

"Oh, I fancy it was love at first sight, but she isn't a jilt."

"Come, Mary, do be sensible. Isn't it jilting a man when you act with him, and meander round with him, and walk and talk and make eyes at him, and then throw him over? Why, the Magdalen posed the whole time she was here, and thoroughly gulled that poor man."

"Nonsense, Frank, I don't understand—there—I am honest, and I say I have lost; still, I'm sure Magdalen *did* like him and believed herself capable of making him happy; and, as he adored her, it was very foolish of her to refuse. Still, till something, or some one, proves it to me in black and white, I shall not believe Magdalen hopelessly heartless."

"Women will not understand the simplest logic. Didn't I tell you so at the time? Miss Cuthbert was merely amusing herself with him, she treated him as she has treated others. I wish you had not tried to bring it on; it's rather hard on a nice fellow like Leslie. However—"

"Don't, Frank," said his wife impatiently. "I'm horribly disappointed; indeed, I would rather my party had failed than this— Poor Magdalen!"

"That is certainly wasted pity, but, of course, least said soonest mended. Only, next time, don't ask the man and the woman here."

Lady Mary shrugged her shoulders impatiently.

"You remind me of the clergyman who in the marriage service says—"Who giveth this woman to be married to this man." Have you noticed, Frank, there is no orthodox answer in the Prayer Book? I own I *meant* to do it, but—there, I need not have expected sympathy from *you*."

"Polly, don't be cross, but—look here—I may be awfully old-fashioned, but there's too much of this match-making in society; there are enough masculine fools without our trying to add to their number. But I'm wasting breath, your face says you are not convinced."

Lady Mary rose and slowly paced the room. This pair, happy as they were, and because they were happy, did not often indulge in the expression of their deeper thoughts.

"Look here, Frank, I was wrong to—make a wager about it, but at the bottom of my heart it was really because I—I wanted some one, I wanted Magdalen, to be as happy as I am."

Frank was conquered, and the quarrel ended here; but, strangely enough, both kept their own opinion—Frank that Magdalen Cuthbert was a shameless flirt, and had purposely beguiled Brice Leslie, and Lady Mary that some mystery was involved in her failure.

Brice Leslie was thrown back by the excitement he had gone through; a temporary paralysis of his limbs,

a common result of diphtheria, succeeded in rendering him helpless as a baby, and much speculation of course, followed as to the reason. Miss Leslie put it down to one set of causes, the doctor to another, and the nurse to her having been told to leave him. The real reason, strangely enough, was never discovered.

But Brice's serious symptoms soon passed away. Perhaps the definite breaking off with Magdalen was, in reality, a relief to his mind, although he would not own it to himself. He could not help recognising the truth of Magdalen's words, at the same time that he was feeling as if life could never be the same to him again. The doctors—for a second one had to be called in—both agreed that, as soon as possible, the invalid should be moved on board ship and should take a sea-voyage. That would restore him better than anything else. His constitution was naturally strong, he would thus be able to overcome the after-effects of that treacherous malady.

Griselda Foy at this time wrote oftener than ever; she sent books to Brice, flowers and fruit, and her daily thoughtfulness began to tell, now that the Gordian knot was really cut. She had grown wonderfully older in this last month; even her home people recognised the fact, and this caused her mother to be very tender with her. There was no doubt now that she loved Brice too much ever to think of any one else; all ideas of seeing Griselda a duchess or a fashionable lady were forever given up by Mrs. Foy.

When she heard Brice was to be carried on board a P. and O., and take the voyage to the Cape and back, Griselda was very glad. Something in her heart told her this was best, and young as she was she had the power of forgetting herself in the thought for those she loved. It is a question often worth sifting, whether such people get their reward. Griselda did, but it would not be safe for any one to embark on the path of unselfishness with any certain hope of it. They might find that virtue has most often to be content with itself and with nothing else for a prize.

But on the same day that Griselda heard the news that Brice would have to go abroad immediately, and that she might come and see him for a brief five minutes to say good-bye, she received a note in an unknown hand. The letter was signed A. Stewart, and was short, the characters being very shaky and not very legible.

"DEAR MISS FOY,—I am writing a very hasty line, to satisfy the mind of my dear patient. She cannot speak, but she is just able to write, and I copy her words: 'Tell her that I have kept my promise; my love to both.—MAGDALEN.' I am sure you will all the more value the message when you know how great an effort it was for her to write at all. She is very ill, but we have two famous throat-doctors, and they have every hope of her recovery. I am kept out of the sick-room, as I can do nothing, and intense quiet is

absolutely necessary in such a bad case of diphtheria. —Yours sincerely, A. STEWART."

When Griselda went to say good-bye to Brice she gave up some of her precious time in order that he might read the note. "I know you would rather read this, dear Brice," she said very quickly. He turned intensely pale as he took the letter.

"I have got over it—she must," he said, not daring to look at Griselda.

"I hope she will—because—because I love her."

"Telegraph to me, Griselda."

"Yes; and oh, Brice, you will come back well and strong, and then, then—if—"

Neither of them said any more; tragic moments in some lives are tragic because wordless.

In her town house Magdalen Cuthbert at that moment lay motionless in her sick-room. This woman, so much admired and sought after, was strangely lonely, or so it would have seemed to an outsider. The people who knew her best were all out of London. The few who did more than admire her were not allowed to come to her, the risk was too great; Mrs. Stewart herself, still very delicate, was really only in the way, and the doctors expelled her. There were two trained nurses, who took the nursing in turn. One of them had a gentle, sweet face, and Magdalen, when she cared to do anything, liked looking at her;

but the disease had attacked her in its most virulent form—it cut her off almost at once from her fellow-creatures, for her throat was too bad to allow her to speak.

Both nurses said she was extraordinarily patient and calm; they even hinted that she ought to be roused a little more, that she ought to fight with death, and when off duty they told stories of various cases of people who had lived, apparently because they would not die.

The doctors were wonderfully skilful, and they looked upon the case as one full of interest to science. They were heroic in their devotion and untiring in their efforts. They really conquered the disease, obstinate as it proved to be. One of them, indeed, the younger doctor, took a very deep interest in the patient, because he was struck with her forlorn condition. He said once, "Such a handsome woman, and yet not one relation to come to her, only that fussy old woman who is useless." Magdalen had several times smiled at him, even though she could not speak, and apparently her smile retained its old power.

They conquered the diphtheria, that was true, but the prostration was terrible; they had to fight next against that. The elder physician began to look grave. "This is getting serious," he remarked to his colleague.

"Serious, yes, but not too serious," said the other man. "She has a splendid constitution."

"That seems to make but little difference in these diphtheritic cases."

But the younger man was determined to save her; he disbelieved in rules about recovery.

Magdalen herself did not allow her thoughts to be divined. She bore everything with heroic courage, but as for the rest—

Her mind had remained perfectly clear through all the agony of her suffering, but at this moment that terrible ordeal was over and she now and then fancied herself elsewhere. Now and then, too, she thought Percy had come back and was standing close beside her; she could see his handsome face, his smile, and his dark eyes full of love. She stretched out her hand to touch him, and to ask him why he did not kiss her, but instead of finding him she touched the nurse who sat there reading. She was studying her Bible, and the place was marked by a lace picture of the Crucifixion. Magdalen was suddenly recalled to reality by being conscious of the nurse's gentle face, for the young woman rose and bent over her, and asked her if she wanted anything.

"I thought you were Percy," whispered Magdalen, as if the nurse must know whom she meant.

The lace picture fell on the bed, and Magdalen's blue eyes rested upon it.

"Pin it up," she said, "where I can see it."

The nurse complied. In another moment, how-

ever, the blue eyes looked at the nurse, and Magdalen tried to shake her head.

"Shall I take it down?"

"Yes."

"You do not like it?"

"I want a—a—little joy. Is there any—anywhere?"

It was getting dusk, and there was a gentle knock at the door. The nurse went softly to open it, and a telegram was handed in to her. She came back to the bedside. Mrs. Stewart had opened it, and had sent it up.

"Here is a message from a friend. Shall I read it?

The blue eyes said "yes." They were not dimmed at all, and the nurse admired them immensely.

"Give her our love.—GRISELDA."

Suddenly there was a smile over the patient's face; it lit up all the features; it seemed to triumph over pain and over weariness; it seemed as if she had received the answer to her question, and that the answer had been a certainty—that there was joy somewhere, even for her.

But as suddenly the smile faded, the eyes closed, and the door opened to let the young doctor come in.

He gave one glance at the beautiful face, and seized a bottle close at hand. He put his arm round

Magdalen, and lifted her gently—she was already unconscious—and tried to pour the liquid down her throat.

"Ah!" he thought, "it sometimes happens like this in these cases—sudden syncope. Hayles was right after all."

He and the nurse did their utmost, but it was useless.

Both of them were too much used to death to be outwardly moved, but in his heart the young man grieved. Aloud he said—

"A clot of blood touched the heart. It must have been instantaneous. No blame to you, nurse; you did everything that was possible. Our skill is powerless in such cases."

"She was too beautiful to die," said the nurse, and there were unshed tears in her eyes.

"How old did you say?" asked the doctor, when he had to write the certificate of death.

"A woman of forty."

But there were a few then and afterwards who sorrowed deeply, and who never forgot Magdalen Cuthbert.

THE END.

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